





LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
R391a
v.2





THE ALDERMAN'S CHILDREN.

THE ALDERMAN'S CHILDREN.

BY

JAMES BRINSLEY-RICHARDS,

AUTHOR OF

"SEVEN YEARS AT ETON," "THE DUKE'S MARRIAGE,"
AND "PRINCE RODERICK."



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON :

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1891.

(All rights reserved.)



THE ALDERMAN'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

THE morning post brought no letter from Mr. Harrowell. During breakfast the family were in momentary expectation of receiving a telegram; but as none came, they fell back upon the explanation that their father must still be fancying that they were away from home.

These excuses served till noon, when an undefinable uneasiness, which not one of the three avowed to the others, began to creep over Charlie and his sisters. Charlie, who remained at home all the morning, took up a Bradshaw, and, with the map spread on a table, measured the distance from Norwich to the station which he supposed to be nearest to Woodlands. At Woodlands there was no station. However, all this was mere

groping in the dark, for nothing but conjecture pointed to Norfolk as the scene of Mr. Harrowell's journey.

"I think I'll go up to the office in Mincing Lane," said Charlie, looking at his watch. "Gleene and Sheeves may know where father has gone"—Messrs. Gleene and Sheeves being Mr. Harrowell's partners.

It was agreed that Charlie's idea was good; but, before he had started, Jemima, the housemaid, came downstairs with a communication. She had discovered that her master's night-shirt and one of the two razors off his dressing-table were missing.

"Did you not notice that the night-shirt was missing when you made the bed yesterday?" asked Ann.

"No, miss, I did not, though I ought to a' done," acknowledged Jemima, who was the counterpart of Eliza as to age and angularity.

"I presume the shaving-brush has gone too?" said Charlie.

"No, Mr. Charles, not the shaving-brush, nor the strop; only one of the two razors off the case on the dressing-table."

Jemima's statement sent Charlie and his sisters up to their father's bed-room, where they looked around in a curious, but rather purposeless way. It was evident that Mr. Harrowell had contemplated being absent for a night, and it might be that he had taken some linen with him besides his night-shirt. Ann could not say how many shirts and pairs of socks her father possessed, for he made all his purchases for himself; so a peep into his chest of drawers brought no fresh information.

They were afraid to disturb anything in the neat ordinance of the room, lest Mr. Harrowell should suddenly return and surprise them. Even as they were commenting on the singularity of the fact that their father should not have taken a bag with him, a double knock at the street door made them scurry out of the chamber. Half-way downstairs they were met by Eliza, who announced that Mr. Ramshart was in the parlour.

A thought, however, had occurred to Charlie, and, on reaching the hall, he commenced an exploration among the hats and overcoats that hung on the pegs.

"Yes, it's gone," he exclaimed.

"What's gone?" asked Ann.

"Why, the hand-bag I used to take up to the city when I was in Blew's office. It was smaller than father's, and I dare say he found it more convenient for a short journey."

"Yes, but see there," exclaimed Lucy, in astonishment. "Papa has only two hats, and there they both hang—his thick and light overcoat, too; and here are his stick and umbrella in the stand."

"His faithful umbrella!" echoed Charlie. "Well, I confess that does surprise me. As for a hat, he may have bought some travelling head-gear on Saturday; but it isn't like the guv'nor to buy a new umbrella, so long as the old one will stand resilking."

"He must have forgotten it," said Lucy.

"In any case, it's a relief that your bag should be gone," observed Ann. "I began to be afraid lest an accident had happened; but it now strikes me that papa must have left word at the office that he was going away for several days, otherwise Mr. Sheeves would have sent round long ago to inquire if he was ill."

This consideration reassured them all, and Charlie gave up his project of starting for Mincing Lane. But whilst his sisters went into the parlour with serene faces to greet Mr. Ramshart, his countenance assumed a very surly expression. Tobias Ramshart was the brother of the Captain Ramshart who had been chastised by Travers for insolence to Mabel, and it displeased Charlie to recollect that the curate had been paying marked attentions to Lucy. He had it on his lips to whisper, as his sisters passed in to the parlour, "I say, get rid of that fellow as soon as possible." The words came too late ; but Charlie avoided going into the parlour for ten minutes, and, when he did enter, he was scarcely civil to the curate.

Lucy noticed his boorishness with indignant surprise ; and Mr. Ramshart, always shy, was thrown into utter bewilderment by Charlie's ungracious way of shaking hands with him.

"I have been at Portland since I last saw you," said the poor man, in a propitiatory manner.

"Are you going back there?" asked

Charlie, as if the matter were one of perfect indifference to him.

"Oh no! I only took the duty for a month, and I have just been telling the young ladies what painfully interesting cases one sometimes meets there among the convicts."

"A lot of unhung scamps, I should say," grumbled Charlie, lolling upon a chair and affecting to open a newspaper.

"Well, not all," rejoined the curate, mildly. "For instance, I have been powerfully stirred by the case of a man who I believe was condemned for murder being innocent. One of the ablest criminal lawyers, who is a great friend of my brother's, has kindly consented to review all the evidence for me, and I am to see him this afternoon."

"And you think that you two know more than the judge and the twelve jurymen who tried the case?"

"Charlie, don't be so captious," expostulated Lucy. "What has come over you all of a sudden?"

Lucy was no more prepared for the effect of her words than if she had trodden on a detonating capsule.

"Why, it's this," said Charlie, rising and speaking with irritation. "You alluded to your brother just now, Ramshart; may I ask if you have ever heard the name of Travers—Chauncey Travers?"

"Travers?" echoed the clergyman, dumbfounded. That was the name which he was under a promise to Mrs. Snow not to reveal in any connection with her husband.

"Yes, Travers," repeated Charlie. "Your brother knows it, for Mr. Travers was compelled to horsewhip him the other day for gross insolence to a lady, Travers's own sister."

"My brother horsewhipped!" gasped the curate, mentally capsized.

"And deservedly too," proceeded Charlie, with growing warmth. "But what I want to say is, that the lady whom your brother insulted, Baroness de la Neva, is one whom I consider under my special protection. Before my sisters here, I tell you, as I shall soon tell my father, that I hope to make her my wife; and you will perceive that, under these circumstances, it must be very disagreeable for me to meet any one of your name."

"This is very strange," murmured the

curate, not recovered from his shock ; “ but I must assure you, Harrowell, that I hold my brother to be utterly incapable of insulting a lady.”

“ Well, I have stated the facts,” cried Charlie.

“ The facts as they have been related to you,” demurred Mr. Ramshart. “ Please, will you tell me where Mr. Chauncey Travers lives ? ”

“ He lived in Northampton Square at the time of the occurrence I have mentioned, but he has removed since.”

“ And he has a sister who is a Baroness—do you happen to know her Christian name ? ”

“ Her name is Mabel,” interposed Ann, who had kept her gaze studiously fixed on the curate. “ She is a very pretty young widow, with large soft eyes.”

“ I must make inquiries into all this,” said Mr. Ramshart, with a lost look. “ There is more than one mystery in the matter.” And, with as much dignity as he could command in his highly perturbed condition of mind, he took his leave.

Ann and Lucy had not dared to interfere

in the dispute between the two men. When men meet in serious encounter, the women stand by until one of the combatants gets worsted, and then is the time for feminine intervention. But in this wholly unexpected engagement neither of the disputants had prevailed. Mr. Ramshart had departed like one who goes to seek fresh arms, and stupor kept the tongues of the two girls enchained for some moments after he was gone.

Ann was the first to turn upon Charlie.

"You should not have spoken like that to Mr. Ramshart, dear. If his brother did behave rudely to the Baroness, it was no fault of his."

"There was not simple rudeness, but downright ruffianly outrage," exclaimed Charlie, whose cheeks were aflame. "And I should like to know, Annie, how you would receive the sister of a woman who had put some infamous affront upon Hugh Armstrong."

"I wish at least you had told us of this," replied Ann, reddening. "We could then have tried to spare Mr. Ramshart this painful scene."

“For my part I do not believe for a moment that any Ramshart was ever horse-whipped by Mr. Travers,” declared Lucy.

She was not so enamoured of the curate as to take his defence with unreflecting wrath, yet she was very angry. To her knowledge, Mr. Ramshart was blameless in all that he did, and deserved from no man a rough or uncivil word. Too proud to cry, too much offended to speak further, she walked out of the room in silence; but from that moment she cherished as much antipathy as a just mind could feel against her promised sister-in-law, the Baroness.

Happily, the domestic discord received a prompt check; for, while the nerves of Ann and Charlie were still jarring, a messenger arrived from Mincing Lane with a letter for Mr. Harrowell.

Charlie knew this messenger, and went out into the hall to question him.

“Robinson, were they not aware at the office that my father was absent?”

“Yes, sir, but Mr. Sheeves thought he would be home this afternoon.”

“Do you know if the contents of the letter are pressing?”

“No, sir ; I was to bring an answer if the alderman was in, and to leave the letter if he was *hout*.”

Charlie could not venture to open a letter addressed to his father, but, partly because he was glad to get away from home after the scene which he had just had with his sisters, and partly because he was curious to know where his father had gone, he resumed his intention of seeking news in Mincing Lane. As he drove thither in a cab, he arrived at the office before the messenger. On the way he worried himself by suspecting that Mr. Harrowell had perhaps not gone to Norfolk after all, but to Southampton or some other port, in order to make arrangements for his—Charlie's—transportation to China. In his last interview with his father, Charlie had flatly refused filial obedience, and it might be that Mr. Harrowell meant to assert his parental authority by some very summary process of banishment.

Although the house of Harrowell, Sheeves, and Gleene was tenanted by an old-fashioned firm, it had been built at a time when the merchant princes of the city were beginning

to care about the exterior of the dwellings in which they transacted business. It was a mansion with wide doors, passages, and windows, cold and plain, but stately. The grey livery and red waistcoat of the hall porter, the polished mahogany and brass of the folding-doors, the thickness of the mats and floor-cloths, all testified to the substance of "Harrowell's," and so did the official demeanour of the clerks. All these clerks wore frock-coats and black ties: whatever might be their individual tastes in attire, they could only indulge them when off duty, and in this respect no difference was made between the "superior young gentlemen" in the tasting-room and the junior supernumerary. The clerks at "Harrowell's" never got up such a thing as a Derby sweep or left a sporting newspaper dragging about on their chairs. There was not one of them would have had the effrontery to light a pipe or cigarette within a hundred yards of the office, unless quite certain that the head partner, whom all addressed as "Sir," was safe on his way home.

Charlie was quite a stranger in this highly

decorous establishment, and he had to pass his card before he could obtain immediate admission to the presence of Mr. Sheeves, the second partner.

"Your father is not back from Norfolk yet?" asked this gentleman, shaking hands with him, and removing a load from Charlie's mind by his first words. "But you expect him back to-day, don't you?"

"I know nothing about his movements," answered Charlie. And forthwith explained that he and his sisters had been staying with the Blews when Mr. Harrowell left London.

"Ah, I see! Your father appears to have taken his resolution rather suddenly. I was with him a long time on Friday, and he said nothing about his journey, but on Saturday his mind was made up. By-the-by, that estate of Woodlands is a splendid place, as I hear."

"Yes, they say it is a fine place," responded Charlie.

"You're going to become quite grand people," continued Mr. Sheeves, not without a touch of irony in his tone. He was a tall, middle-aged, rather care-worn man, with

a bluish nose and fidgety manner. The father of a large family, including three marriageable daughters and three sons, who were just starting in the world, he was a great believer in the little adjuncts to social success. He tried to keep his name before the world by attending to a multitude of things besides his tea business; in fact, tea was the article about which he concerned himself least. He was a colonel of volunteers, a city lieutenant, and a director of many companies. He went to court in crimson and gold; he sat on innumerable committees, charitable, ecclesiastical, and political; he had presented a drinking fountain to his native town, and he gave dinners to big people, who, it is to be feared, took little notice of him after they had eaten his food.

Mr. Sheeves and his partner, Mr. Gleene, had always imagined that they understood the science of life much better than their senior, Mr. Harrowell. Whilst he saved his money, they spent theirs; whilst he denied himself all pleasures, they ate of the fat of the land, and rejoiced to see their sons and daughters take kindly to the same diet. It

had become natural to them both to let Thomas Harrowell do all the hard work of the firm, while they acted as ornamental partners, and assuredly they had never contemplated that he would set himself socially above their heads. And yet here was he suddenly shooting upwards like a sky-rocket, an alderman, a future Lord Mayor and potential baronet, and the intending purchaser of an estate which would enroll him among the best of the landed gentry. It cannot be said that either Mr. Sheeves or Mr. Gleene quite relished the transformation undergone by their old friend.

"So you have been staying with the Blews, Charlie. Well, now you have broken the ice, I hope you will favour us with your company." Mr. Sheeves tried to say this good-naturedly, but could not quite get the sourness out of his tone.

"I shall be delighted, I am sure," responded Charlie.

"We can't show you an old squirarchy, with ten thousand acres of shooting," proceeded Mr. Sheeves, clutching at his whiskers and shirt collar, "but we have got a nice little

place at Henley for the summer. When will you come with your sisters—next Saturday ? ”

“ I think we are going to the Blews again next Saturday. The rain shortened our visit yesterday.”

“ Ah, well, we’re not going to force you,” answered Mr. Sheeves, nettled at his hospitality being rebuffed. “ I dare say you are going to be very busy in Norfolk now. Your father talked a good deal about you on Saturday, and he seemed quite determined to set you up as a dashing young squire in no time.”

“ I hope I may develop some vocation for the post,” smiled Charlie. “ But, by-the-by, did you wish any message to be delivered to my father with the letter you sent to-day ? ”

“ No—at least, only this, that word was sent round from the Mansion House to ask if your father would sit at the Guildhall to-morrow, in place of one of the aldermen who is ill. Must you be off already ? ”

“ I think I must go,” said Charlie. And he retired without a suspicion that Mr.

Sheeves attributed the scantiness of his conversation to a nascent pride of station.

From Mincing Lane Charlie drove straight home, almost expecting to find that his father had arrived; and now that he knew Mr. Harrowell had gone to Norfolk, and not to Southampton, he was rather impatient to see him. From his father having spoken kindly of him to Mr. Sheeves on Saturday—that is, after the scene of Friday night—it was to be surmised that no implacable edict of paternal vengeance was to be apprehended.

But Mr. Harrowell had not come home, and the whole afternoon passed without his returning. It was not an agreeable afternoon, for the domestic harmony of the previous day was wanting. Lucy, still offended, kept to her room. Ann had been reflecting that, if Charlie was so infatuated of his Baroness as to speak already of her before strangers as his future wife, there was little prospect of family peace. New storms, more violent than any that had occurred before, would soon be breaking out, and Ann asked herself, apprehensively, with whom it would be her duty to side?

Charlie must have read on her grave face that her mind was disturbed, and, feeling in no humour to be lectured, he betook himself to the drawing-room, threw himself on a sofa near the open window of the balcony, and began reading a novel.

The afternoon wore on till six, when dinner was again put off for an hour. Ann came herself into the drawing-room to announce this, and, by way of restoring friendly intercourse, made some genial remark about the weather. It was a calm and mild summer evening, the slanting rays of the setting sun made a golden glow upon the carpet, the voices of boys arose blithely in the cricket-field, and Charlie, who had found his book interesting, reclined upon his sofa in a lazy, good-tempered mood.

Suddenly an appalling shriek resounded through the house. It was one of those shrieks that make the hearer spring to his feet, heart-frozen. Another and another was uttered, with a hysteric cry of—

“Master! Master! Murder!”

Ann and Charlie rushing from the drawing-room, and Lucy from her bedroom, perceived

Jemima on the landing outside Mr. Harrowell's bedroom. She was prostrate in convulsions, and screaming. They flew past her into the room, and in the same instant a horrified wail broke from the lips of the two sisters.

The door of a deep clothes-cupboard stood wide open, and there, in a sitting posture, lay the body of Mr. Harrowell, clothed in a night-shirt drenched with dried blood, a razor in one hand, and his throat cut from ear to ear.





CHAPTER II.

APPARENTLY the alderman had committed suicide. In the first frantic moment, Charlie ran forward by himself to lift the body, and to examine if there were any signs of life. He had never seen a corpse before, otherwise a glance would have told him that the sunken jaw, the glazed eyes, wide open, and the cold, inert limbs showed that death had occurred many hours previously. In fact, the period of cadaveric rigidity, which sets in a few hours after death, and lasts for a day was already passing off, and the limbs were becoming flexible again. This enabled the inspector of police, who was called in, to pronounce as soon as he beheld the corpse—

“This happened in the night of Sunday to Monday.”

The body was then lying on the bed.

Charlie had raised it with some help from his sisters, for the servants were paralyzed with fear. Had death occurred within the twenty-four hours, it would have been impossible to stretch out the limbs ; they would have maintained the attitude which they held when the stiffening began. But although not yet quite pliant, they yielded to the gentle pressure of the dead man's children, whose first tender care it was to make their father look as if he slept. The arms were brought down to the sides, an attempt was made to close the eyes, and a sheet was spread over the corpse and its ghastly wound, leaving only the face exposed. The razor, which had dropped from the lifeless fingers, was set on a table, and covered with a white handkerchief.

"It is a pity that you moved the body, sir," said the inspector to Charlie, after he had thrown a searching glance round the room. "But you don't suspect foul play, do you?"

"No," answered Charlie, who could hardly articulate. What enemies had his father? and who could have had an interest in killing him?

“There’s no property missing?” continued the inspector. “Do you know, sir, if the poor gentleman had any trouble on his mind?”

“My father has had troubles for some weeks,” faltered Charlie, hanging his head. Worse than his father’s death was the atrocious thought that his own conduct might have produced this act of despair.

The inspector threw a keen look at him, but made no remark. With the assistance of a policeman in plain clothes who had come with him, he set about exploring the cupboard in which to all appearance the suicide had been committed.

It adds to the horror of deaths like this, that all their material circumstances are repulsive to the senses. Not only are the senses of sight and touch shocked, but the other senses revolt at what is perishable and corruptible in the dead.

Enough of this! It was the business of the police to reconstruct the death scene. Out of the sanguinary fragments of evidence before them, they had to piece together a picture. Manifestly, Mr. Harrowell had destroyed himself standing in the cupboard

or closet; for it was a deep, roomy place. First, he had undressed himself and gone to bed, no doubt to meditate over the act he was going to perform. Next he had removed into the closet all the clothes he had worn that day. Then he had stood up in a shallow sponge bath, probably to prevent his blood from trickling under the door into the bedroom, and, as a further precaution, he had covered the floor with an indiarubber mackintosh.

The deed must have been done in the dark, for the door of the closet was shut. It closed with an ordinary catch. After a time the body must have slipped from its original position, and that accounted for the thud against the wooden partition which Charlie had heard as he was going to bed. After another lapse, when the rigidity was relaxing, the corpse had dropped with a much louder noise into a sitting posture. Jemima, who was in the room, turning the bed-clothes down in expectation of her master's home-coming, had been startled by the sound, had opened the door, and so had the body been discovered.

But why had Mr. Harrowell taken such sedulous pains to secrete himself when about to throw away his life? Why had he hidden his clothes? And why—woful picture!—had he destroyed himself in the dark?

Temporary insanity explained everything to the inspector's mind, as it did later to those of the coroner and jury. Charlie, who, scared and sick at heart as he was, followed all the investigations of the police with breathless attention, tendered three pieces of evidence of his own whereof the inspector made light. He could not recognize the mackintosh as having belonged to his father; he mentioned the disappearance of his hand-bag (which now became inexplicable), and he spoke of the house-door chain as having been unfastened on Monday morning. The police, however, work out their conclusions by a rough and ready reckoning, in which contradictory little facts merely count for insignificant fractions as against a grand total. Such fractions need only be computed when two totals of conflicting testimony are very evenly balanced.

But in this case everything suggested

suicide. The dead man's watch was in his waistcoat pocket; his purse with a few sovereigns in it, his pocket-book containing a five-pound note, were both found, and not an article was missing from any room in the house. Clearly, then, no robber had broken in. The three maid-servants slept on the floor above Mr. Harrowell's room, and if there had been any scuffle with a malefactor they must have heard of it; moreover, the room did not bear any trace of a struggle with bloodshedding. Charlie himself never hinted that there had been a crime. Had he not said that his father had no enemies, but that he had been troubled in mind?

The coroner and his jury were assailed with no doubts; for, to pass over two or three fearful days, during which Mr. Harrowell's children were sunk in horror, grief, and remorse, the inquest revealed nothing new. Mr. Sheeves was called as a witness, as having been one of the last persons who had seen his partner alive, and he deposed that a great change had certainly come over Mr. Harrowell during the last three months. Jemima and the other servants, who gave

their incoherent evidence whimpering, testified that their master had been "very low" whilst his children were absent.

Charlie and his sisters simply related, amid sympathetic murmurs, that their father had experienced some domestic worries, but they were not pressed with questions. The whole inquest, including the solemn procession of the jurymen up to Mr. Harrowell's room to view the body, lasted a little more than an hour. The coroner, in summing up, made a regretful allusion to the respected alderman, who had died through a "sudden clouding of his intellect;" and the jury, without hesitation, returned a verdict of "Suicide while in a state of temporary insanity."

The funeral took place two days later at Highgate Cemetery. The early hour of nine had been fixed for the starting of the hearse from Highbury Place, and rain prevented any assemblage of crowds. But, indeed, the alderman's death had caused no public commotion. It would have been different had there been any suspicion of mystery, and had the event occurred during the parliamentary recess, when the newspapers have plenty of

space at their disposal. As it was, the inquest got reported in a few small-print lines, without any editorial comments.

Mr. Harrowell had never been prominently before the public, and in society he was unknown. The Lord Mayor and most of the aldermen sent their private carriages. The Blews, the Sheeves, the Gleenes, and a few other friends sent wreaths. Among the floral offerings was one from Lady Champlesse and her daughter, and one from Chauncey Travers and "Mabel, Baroness de la Neva"—these words written in pencil on one of her brother's cards.

The procession wended its way up the Holloway Road, where the Saturday market booths were doing as much trade as the wet weather allowed. Tramcars and omnibuses whose sloppy horses reeked, and whose coachmen had their collars up, stopped to let the long array of carriages pass. In the first mourning coach were Charlie, with a long band round his hat, and his sisters, who wore crape veils, and kept their handkerchiefs to their eyes with no mere parade of sorrow.

In one of the hinder coaches sat Chauncey Travers with the family solicitor, and a fine-looking stranger with a brown beard and a sunburnt face. In the quarter of an hour during which the mourners mustered in the dining-room, at Highbury Place, while the coffin was being carried downstairs, Travers had noticed that this stranger spoke rather confidentially with Charlie; and he also observed him hand Ann Harrowell into her coach with a solicitude unmistakably affectionate. Further, Travers fancied he had caught the name of Armstrong.

"May I ask if I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Hugh Armstrong?" he asked when they had journeyed a few minutes in silence. "My name is Chauncey Travers."

"Oh yes, my name is Armstrong," answered the other, shaking the hand that was at once proffered. "I have just returned from Egypt."

"What a very sad affair this is!" exclaimed Travers, pathetically.

"Horrible—too shocking!" said Armstrong with a shudder. "Were you acquainted with Mr. Harrowell?"

"No; I had not that advantage; but Charlie Harrowell and I are very old friends."

"Yes, I know," replied the journalist, and curiously he scrutinized the man of whom he had heard a great deal, but in very different strains, from Ann and from Charlie. He did not like his looks, but Travers liked his still less.

All at once, after a moment's scrutiny, Armstrong said—

"Didn't I see you in Paris the other day?"

"No," answered Travers, wondering.

"Strange! You are surprisingly like a man who left the Grand Hotel at the same time as I, and crossed from Calais with me on Tuesday night."

But again Travers denied the identity, and so flatly that Mr. Armstrong had to change the subject.

Past the Nag's Head, at the corner of the Seven Sisters Road, the hearse and the carriages broke into a trot, which was kept up till the foot of Highgate Hill. The rain was coming down faster, the panes of the carriage windows were blurred, and the road was all slush. So far away is one London

parish from another in its interests, that in this region there was not enough curiosity about the procession to bring tradesmen to their doors. The funeral of a local vestryman would have attracted more notice.

At the cemetery everything had to be done in a hurry because of the rain. After the short service in the small bare chapel, the clergyman tottered behind the coffin with his surplice ballooning in the wind, and somebody holding an umbrella over him. The mourners trudged behind in varying degrees of wretchedness as they stepped into puddles and saw their boots becoming caked with clayey soil. Most had to give up the pretence of keeping their hats off, for they wanted both hands to hold their umbrellas.

Round the open vault, sawdust had been scattered; but the mounds of yellow earth thrown up were soaked, and the planks whereon the sexton's men stood with their ropes and windlass were slimed with liquid mud. Thomas Harrowell was to be laid beside his wife under the shadow of a yew which he had himself planted twenty years before, and which had now grown to full

height. Its drooping branches formed a canopy over the plain marble headstone, on which was carved, in black letters: "*The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*"

As the little congregation grouped themselves round the grave, Mr. Ramshart, who had walked to the cemetery, quietly joined the circle. If it had not been for Charlie Harrowell's quarrel with him, he would have requested permission to officiate in the service, and in any case he would have been offered a seat in one of the mourning coaches. As things stood he had hardly a claim to be a friend of the family, and yet there he was, with the ends of his trousers turned up, his coat buttoned to his chin, and his damp wideawake in his hand, not the least reverent and sincere of the mourners present.

For all which, he could not give his undivided attention to the service. The minister was saying, "*Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts*"—and Mr. Ramshart was looking around for Chauncey Travers. During five days he had sought this man without success, for it had been impossible to intrude

upon Charlie in his bereavement in order to ask him where Travers had gone after removing from Northampton Square. But it was all important to Ramshart to find Mabel Snow's brother, and it had struck him that Travers might possibly attend the funeral.

Among the wreaths piled up on the sawdust he perceived that which bore Travers's card with Baroness de la Neva's name, and he scanned the visages around him to detect which, if any, were that of Mabel's brother. His eyes settled on Travers, and a dim resemblance to Mabel arose out of the lineaments. Utterly unlike as the two faces were in their expression, Travers was the only man among the bystanders whose relationship to Mabel could possibly be traced through the features.

The service was over. The handfuls of earth had been strewn on the coffin, and the throng parted to right and left, as Charlie Harrowell and his sisters, after one last gaze at the grave, turned away. Mr. Ramshart sidled up to Hugh Armstrong, whom he had known of old, and now greeted for the first time since his return, and he inquired in a

whisper if the latter could point out Mr. Travers. Armstrong did so, and the curate, taking a short cut over some grave mounds to the spot where Travers stood, slightly touched his arm.

"Mr. Travers, may I say a word to you? I am Mr. Ramshart."

"What do you want with me?" asked Travers, who had started and turned pale, as he did whenever abruptly accosted by a stranger.

"Let us allow the others to pass on," stammered Mr. Ramshart, who was trembling all over, not from fear, but from shyness and excitement. "I have sought you in vain for days, and that must be my excuse for addressing you at such a moment. Mr. Travers, I am acquainted with your sister and her poor husband, Albert Snow."

"I don't in the least understand what you mean," answered Travers, staring.

"Must I be more explicit?" rejoined the curate, in a low, appealing voice, as he looked his interlocutor in the face. "I can understand that you should wish to conceal your relationship with Albert Snow, nor am

I the man to divulge it ; pray believe that. But it was your own sister, Mrs. Snow, who gave me your name and address."

" If any woman named Mrs. Snow has been passing herself off as my sister, she has imposed upon you," was Travers's reply.

" But not long ago I sent a letter for Mrs. Snow to your house."

" I remember getting such a letter and wondering what it meant. But as my chambers are not a *post restante*, the epistle must long ago have gone into the fire."

This audacity confounded the meek soul of the curate, and yet not utterly. As Travers would have shaken him off by walking away, Tobias Ramshart stepped out too, and remonstrated—

" Pardon me, Mr. Travers, but if I venture to doubt your word, you have afforded me some cause. You appear to have told Charles Harrowell that you had chastised my brother. Now, the account which my brother gives me is very different."

" Your brother is Captain Job Ramshart ? I am sorry for it, as his word is only worth that of a villain. I thrashed him for insulting

my sister ; and you may tell him, from me, that if he crosses my path again I shall shoot him."

Mr. Ramshart did not treat this as a vain threat ; for if ever hatred glared from the face of a man it did from Travers's. The curate stood amazed, while Travers, hurrying along the gravel path, joined Hugh Armstrong, who was loitering behind the others in expectation of Ramshart's company. So undemonstrative had been the dialogue between the two men, that Armstrong had not observed that anything unusual had passed between them.

"Isn't Ramshart coming?" he asked.

"I think not," answered Travers, looking round ; for the curate had turned away, and was disappearing among the tombs. "I suppose now we are going to hear the will read," he added.

"Yes. Are you coming?" said Armstrong, a little surprised.

"I am. Charlie invited me to be present."

Themourning coaches and private carriages were all scattering, as Travers and Armstrong reached the gates of the cemetery. Charlie

returned to Highbury Place in Mr. Sheeves's brougham, Ann and Lucy in Mr. Gleene's. Travers, seeing that the coaches were not in request, proposed to share a hansom with his companion, and Armstrong could not refuse.

The reading of the will was a mere formality, for the contents of it had already been communicated by the solicitor to those chiefly interested. Charlie Harrowell inherited one half of his father's fortune, with the house at Highbury Place, and all that it contained. Ann and Lucy were to divide the other half equally between them. Legacies of one hundred pounds were left to each of the three servants, who were also to receive pensions of a pound a week for life, chargeable upon Charlie's inheritance. The only remaining bequests were presents of five hundred pounds each to Mr. Blew and Mr. Sheeves, on condition of their acting as executors. The will was about three months old, and annexed to it were lists of securities in which the testator's property was invested. From these it appeared to Mr. Sheeves, on a rough computation, that

Mr. Harrowell had died worth about one million two hundred thousand pounds.

Mr. Sheeves had not expected to be appointed executor, and the first use which he made of his authority was to press Ann and Lucy to come and stay with his family at Henley. Mr. Blew had promised his wife to bring back the poor girls to Taplow, but he withdrew his invitation in favour of Mr. Sheeves, which he considered the more expedient of the two. As Mr. Sheeves had now become the head partner in the Harrowell firm, the principal duties of the executorship would devolve upon him, and it was desirable that he should remain in the closest intercourse with the Harrowells.

Ann and Lucy required no pressing. Physically they needed a change of air and scene, and their heavy hearts inclined them to leave the old home which was now fraught with such terrible associations. The time of their going was discussed on the spot, immediately after the reading of the will, and it was agreed that they should pack their things at once, so as to accompany Mr. Sheeves early in the afternoon. They

hoped their brother was going with them, and affectionately insisted that he ought to do so for his health's sake, as he was indeed looking very pale and nervous. But Charlie said that he must remain in London. Perhaps he would pay a visit in a few days, when all business affairs were settled.

When Ann and Lucy left the room, Hugh Armstrong escorted them, as if he were already one of the family. They shook hands with the gentlemen present, and had to bestow the same salutation on Travers, but it was coldly done, without a word, and with an evident aversion from the man.

The gentlemen also—that is, Messrs. Blew, Sheeves, Gleene, and the solicitor—had eyed Travers askance, as he sat apart, with his legs crossed and a new hat on his knees, during the reading of the will. But when they were all gone, including Mr. Sheeves, who was to return in an hour for the girls, Charlie approached his friend with some considerate words and an apology for having neglected him so long. In his black clothes and with his pallid face and sunken eyes, Charlie looked very different from the

dandified young man of a few days ago. Moreover, there was a moral change in him. The remorse of having, as he was intimately persuaded, caused his father's suicide, had marked a line of care upon his brow, which for many a day was not to be wholly effaced.

"How is Mabel?" he asked, in a voice almost plaintive.

"She is in great distress at your misfortune, but deeply sympathetic, and she charged me with all kinds of feeling messages for you."

"She received my letter on Thursday?"

"Yes; and quite understood, of course, that you could not keep your appointment."

"I would have gone to see her if it had been possible," said Charlie. "But now, Travers, I have a request to make you. Will you come and stay with me here for a few days?"

"Why, certainly, my dear boy, if that can give you any solace," replied Travers, kindly.

"I am naturally loth to be all alone in this house," continued Charlie, with a slight shiver. "But there are other reasons. I must consult you about my future life. You are the only friend who knows me with all

my failings ; besides, you are Mabel's brother. You will come, then ? ”

Travers said that he would come with all his heart ; and he was as good as his word, for he arrived in the evening, several hours after Ann and Lucy had left the house. He and Charlie dined together, and at this dinner Eliza noticed, though Travers did not, that Charlie abstained from taking his father's chair. He sat at the foot of the table, and after dinner he did not smoke, albeit Travers lit a cigar. Charlie had not touched tobacco since the death of his father, to whom smoking had been obnoxious.

Another thing that evening moved Eliza and the other servants strangely. For a quarter of a century Mr. Harrowell had read morning and evening prayers daily, whenever he was at home. The family gathering for worship had ceased at his death, but Ann had told Eliza that she would speak to her brother about resuming it after the funeral. Accordingly, at ten o'clock, Eliza knocked at the door of the study, where Charlie and Travers sat in deep converse, and said—

“ We have come up for prayers, sir.”

Charlie glanced at the devoted old servant, who had dandled him when he was a child, and he remained irresolute. But Travers, guessing at the situation, started up, begging that he might not stand in the way of any family usage.

"Please, don't mind me, Charlie. Do as you are accustomed."

"It was my father's custom," said Charlie, after a moment of self-communing, and he walked with his friend into the dining-room. The Bible and the Prayer-book were laid on the table, and Charlie faced the three elderly women in mourning, who stood of a row.

But when he had opened the book—the book that had been his mother's—his eyes fell on the text—

"I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son."

He closed the book. "I can't Eliza. Good-night."

And the three old women left the room in tears, so inexpressibly sad was their young master's voice.



CHAPTER III.

THE Rev. Tobias Ramshart was a simple man, who could not detect the animalculæ in a glass of water, nor the iniquities in a character like that of Travers. He suspected that Travers had not spoken the truth, but the suspicion pointed to such flagitious villainy that it frightened him. A man who has met an animal believing it was a dog, and bethinks himself afterwards that it must have been a wolf, experiences the kind of terror which assailed Mr. Ramshart as he walked away, troubled by the malevolent glare in Travers's eyes.

He left Highgate Cemetery, and set his face towards Finsbury Park, determined to seek an interview with Mrs. Snow ; but what he should say to her was nowise clear in his mind. If she was not Travers's sister, then

he had been deceived by her, and by her unfortunate husband ; but if she was Travers's sister, then Travers was such a dangerous reprobate, that it behoved him to take care how he mixed himself up in the affairs of such a man.

Yet, for Charles Harrowell's sake, he was bound to discover whether Mrs. Snow and Baroness de la Neva were one and the same person. Travers might have two sisters ; but, then, both of them would not be called Mabel. Or it might be that Mabel was but nominally Albert Snow's wife, and that she was really the widow or divorced wife of a foreigner. From one depth of possible evil to another fluttered the poor curate's thoughts, like a flight of birds losing themselves in an abyss.

He was perplexed by another thing, which was that the barrister whom he had consulted about Albert Snow's case saw no flaw in the conviction. To be sure, he had only the newspaper reports of the evidence to go by ; but, assuming these to be correct, he thought the jury's verdict of guilty was the right one. If Ramshart wanted to proceed further with

the case, he must, said the barrister, obtain the minutes of evidence from the Home Office, see the judge who had tried the prisoner, and consult his notes, and afterwards collect sworn evidence from all the witnesses for the prosecution. This was a stupendous task, and one which the curate must undertake alone, for the rules of the prison stopped him from correspondence with the convict, and he was not likely to get much assistance from the authorities. He had written one letter already to the chaplain of Portland about Albert Snow; but he had received a curt reply, amounting to a friendly request that he would mind his own business, for prison chaplains are no fonder than other people of having their own concerns interfered with.

All these obstacles would not daunt Toby Ramshart if he could retain his faith in Mrs. Snow and her husband; but if Mrs. Snow was an adventuress, who had told him untruths, and if Albert Snow had connived in any way at these falsehoods, must not he—Toby Ramshart—avow that he had let himself be duped by the false appearances of innocence?

Long before he had reached his destination, the waters of doubt had destroyed part of the dyke on which the curate had thought he was treading with a safe foot. Mrs. Snow knew the Harrowells, for she had told him so herself. There was consequently but too much reason to believe that she was the person, who, under the name of Baroness de la Neva, had won Charles Harrowell's unsuspecting affections.

Arriving before Mrs. Snow's shop in a state of queer bemirement, Mr. Ramshart hovered about the door for a minute to espy if Mabel was within ; but not seeing her, he closed his umbrella, walked in, and asked the young woman behind the counter if Mrs. Snow was at home ? ”

“ No, sir, she is not here,” answered Madge Rose.

“ Can you tell me at what hour I may find her ? ”

“ Mrs. Snow has been away for some days, and I do not think she will return at all.”

“ But the shop is hers, is it not ? ”

“ It is hers, but the business is being sold.

The post-office has sent that lady to act as postmistress." And Madge moved her auburn head towards a young person who was seated at the postal desk.

Another question the curate asked: "Can you give me Mrs. Snow's present address?"

"No, sir; I don't know it."

"Thank you," said Mr. Ramshart, and walked out again. He saw that the girl behind the counter knew nothing, or did not mean to be communicative; and either surmise would have been right. Madge would have given a year of her life to learn what had become of Mrs. Snow, and why she had yielded up possession of her shop at so short a notice; but in a hurried parting, Mabel had promised her that she should learn everything some day; and Madge, who loved Mabel with an affection which had budded and blossomed rapidly as a summer creeper, was content to wait for the day of explanation.

She had, forsooth, indulged in a hearty cry by herself at being severed from a mistress who had been so sweet a companion and had made her such a happy

home, but secretly she believed there was some romance in this affair. Many of the regular customers, who had noticed Mrs. Snow's frequent absences, had exclaimed, on hearing that she was gone altogether, "Ah, she was too pretty to serve long in a shop. We may be sure she has found a second husband for herself."

"And why not?" thought Madge, though she mentally added, "But I wish she had invited me to her wedding!"

No man is so weak that he can endure to be baulked in an enterprise of moment by a diplomatic chit like Madge Rose. Fate so willed it that Inspector Dadge just then came striding round the corner, his shoulders covered with a cape, his wet red face puffing from exposure to the slanting rain. Surely, reflected Mr. Ramshart, this was the very man to be consulted in an emergency like the present, and so he made a sign to the wondering but alert policeman to accompany him to a spot out of sight of Mrs. Snow's shop windows. Here he at once said—

"I want your professional assistance. Could you help me to ascertain the where-

abouts of a Mrs. Snow, who lately owned yonder shop?"

"I am Mrs. Snow's lodger, sir," said the inspector, focusing his round eyes with astonishment on the curate, "and I should like to know myself where she is gone."

"It ought not to be so very difficult to discover," suggested the curate. "Supposing you were to have the house watched—Mrs. Snow may return to fetch away some of her things."

"Why should I do that for yer?" asked the inspector, stepping from under the shelter of the umbrella which the curate had been holding over him, and speaking in no obliging tone. "I won't help yer to bring any trouble on Mrs. Snow. I've known her for years, and there ain't a more respectable lady in the place."

"You have known her for years!" echoed Mr. Ramshart, startled at this uprising of a witness to Mabel's character. "Did you know her when she lived at Kilburn?"

"Never mind when and where," replied the inspector, disconcerted.

"May I ask your name?"

"I am Inspector Dadge."

"Dadge? Then can it be that you are the Constable Dadge who gave evidence four years ago at the trial of one Albert Snow for murder?" Having so recently read the newspaper reports of Albert Snow's trial, Ramshart had all the names of the witnesses fresh in his memory.

"Ah, you know that story, do you, sir?" muttered the inspector, with an alteration in his manner, which now showed marked uneasiness. "Would you mind stepping across the road with me to the station? We can talk more private there."

He led the way a little distance down the road, and inducted the curate into the small office of his police-station, which smelt of fresh paint, white-wash, and the blue dye of policemen's uniforms. Some shining steel handcuffs and truncheons decorated the space above the chimney-piece, and fronting the inspector's table was a ground-glass sash, which was raised whenever a prisoner was brought in to be charged.

The closing of the sash gave privacy to this little hole, scarcely bigger than a sea-

bathing-machine. Mr. Ramshart, unbuttoning his overcoat, now revealed his clerical attire, and he sat down on a Windsor chair, while the inspector, who had not till then made him out to be a clergyman, took a chair opposite, after divesting himself of his cape and white gloves. More respectful and quieter in his manner since he knew with whom he was speaking, the inspector was yet flurried, and the red fist which he laid upon his writing-table had a curious tremble.

Mr. Ramshart deemed it best to be frank with him up to certain limits, and explained the chief reason of his interest in Mrs. Snow. "I am interested in her on several grounds, but principally because I became acquainted with her husband while acting as chaplain at Portland lately, and I was led to believe that he had not been properly convicted."

"Ah?" gasped the inspector, blowing hard; and his hand trembled the more.

"It is an awful thing to believe a man innocent and yet to see him treated like a felon," continued the curate.

"So it is, sir," acquiesced the inspector, in

a low hoarse voice. "And do yer suspect who is the guilty party?"

"Not at present, but if we could just get hold of the thread of the truth, the unwinding of the skein would lead us to the real murderer."

"Well, it wouldn't do Snow much good, poor fellow, for he's dead."

"Who is dead?" exclaimed Ramshart, with awe. "Why, I saw him three weeks ago."

"He died last week, sir." And there was a pause. "I learned it from Mrs. Snow 'erself, sir. She'd been a crying, and I asked if there was any trouble. So she says to me, says she, 'Inspector, you've known me of old, so I may tell yer the truth. My poor 'usband's dead.' And she showed me a letter from the Governor of Portland prison. Albert Snow had died of chest complaint, rather sudden, in the infirmary."

How death solves things! Nothing remained now of Toby Ramshart's dyke. There was nothing but the overwhelming water with clouds over it.

Though shocked, he could not be altogether surprised, knowing that Albert Snow had suffered from his lungs, and had been trans-

ferred to the infirmary. But now some of the mystery which had enshrouded Mrs. Snow was cleared away. It might be that Charles Harrowell, having met Mrs. Snow during her husband's lifetime, had loved her and proposed to her as soon as he had heard of her husband's death. He may have been cognizant of the death when he spoke at the beginning of the week of making Mabel his wife, and the only question that remained was whether he was aware of Mabel's antecedents, or whether she had been introduced to him under a fictitious name and with an imaginary story. All this passed through the curate's mind before he again broke silence.

"There is an end, then, to our concern for poor Albert Snow. It is no longer so important that I should see his wife."

"Well, sir, you'll excuse my having been a bit blunt at first," said Dadge, whose bloodshot eyes still wore a nervous look. "Now I know you don't mean the poor young thing any harm, I do not mind telling yer if I hear where she is."

"Thank you. If you can inform me of her address I shall be obliged to you."

"I have been wondering whether she hasn't gone away all along o' me," proceeded the inspector, dropping into a pocket-book the card which Mr. Ramshart handed him. "She never told me that she was going, and perhaps she didn't like being in the same house as me, who knew all about her. But she was wrong to be shy of me, for I wouldn't 'ave hurt a 'air of her 'ead. She's had a peck of trouble, poor thing, and it wouldn't be like anybody calling 'imself a man to stop her from leading a quiet honest life."

"No, truly," assented the curate, impressed by the emotion which the inspector displayed.

"She's one of the best young women on this earth, sir," Dadge added, as his visitor was going. "I've watched her day after day, and seen her always steady at her work, quiet, civil, and with a kind word for everybody. There isn't a word she says nor a look in her eyes that don't make you feel you'd like to be protecting of such a young woman. Wherever she may be now, I hope people will let her alone, so that she may have a little peace after her sad by-gones."

"Amen," murmured Tobias Ramshart. And, responding to the inspector's salute by holding out his hand, he left the police-station.

What was there for him to do now? Nothing at all, at present. The mystery of Mabel's two names remained unexplained, so did the effrontery of Travers's denial of Mabel as his sister. Stupefying also was the blaze thrown upon Travers's character by his having told Charles Harrowell a base falsehood about his affray with Ramshart's brother. But it was not for the curate to probe further into these mystifying things—at least, not now, not till he had talked with Mabel and heard her give her own account of herself.

Tobias Ramshart was one of those men who hold a promise as sacred. He knew that the temptations to break a promise are exactly like those which entice us to do any other wrong thing in the hope that good may come of it. We know so little of the destinies that shape our ends, that whenever we set ourselves to direct events by breaking a moral law, some mischief must and does

result from it. Ramshart had promised Mabel that he would not disclose to the Harrowells under what circumstances he had met her, and to that pledge he must remain faithful.

A time might come when Charlie, being now his own master and wealthy, might need a word of warning as to the marriage on which he had set his heart. But that time had not yet come, and before it arrived circumstances might so work that the curate would find but one plain course of duty before him, either in speech or silence.

So he returned quietly to his daily labours among the poor.

* * * * *

As for Inspector Dadge, when Mr. Ramshart had departed, he began to puff and to blow heavily. Muttering things to himself, he unlocked a cupboard, drew out a half-empty bottle of whiskey, and, pouring out a tumblerful of this spirit, swallowed it at one draught.

"That parson gave me a turn," he soliloquized; "but he don't suspect anything. How could he?"



CHAPTER IV.

MABEL was staying in one of the large hotels of Northumberland Avenue, the same in which she had lunched with the Harrowells. For a single lady there is no privacy like that of a big hotel. In lodgings she is under the espionage of landlady and servants; her movements are noted, and her letters counted. But in an hotel nobody cares when she goes out or comes in. She has public rooms at her disposal in which she may receive what visits she pleases without raising a remark. She is one of an unnumbered crowd drained off by daily departures and replenished by fresh hourly arrivals. She may live for a year in such a place without making a friend, or die in it without being missed. When she takes herself away—whatever important scenes in her life's drama may have been

enacted within the hotel—she leaves no record behind except the items of her paid bills in the ledgers.

So Travers had judged when, having insisted that his sister should leave Finsbury Park, he had been obliged to seek temporary quarters for her.

It was a great trial to Mabel to relinquish her shop, but the death of Mr. Harrowell rendered the sacrifice inevitable. She read of the alderman's suicide in the papers with feelings that may be imagined; but, shocked as she was, it became obvious to her that now one great obstacle to her marriage with Charlie was removed. Charlie, being free, could woo her uncontrolled, and everything must now depend on the manner in which he received the story of her life.

A few days more would decide that point; meantime it was obviously inexpedient that she should remain a shopkeeper. She thought for a while that, if Charlie cast her off, she might return to her tranquil business; but the notion was gradually dismissed, since her shop would be no refuge if Charlie once knew she was living there. The bird can

roost no more where her nest has been disturbed. If Mabel was not to be Charles Harrowell's wife, she must disappear for ever, whither she knew not; but she was already musing of expatriation far away to the other end of the world, perhaps to Australia or America. In either of those continents, as she had heard, a young woman easily found well-paid employment.

Yet in her heart of hearts Mabel did not believe that Charlie would turn from her. Had she been aware of the useless falsehoods which Travers had told about her apocryphal husband, the Russian baron, and about her jointure of a thousand a year, she would have entertained very different misgivings; indeed, in such a case she would not have run the risk, but would have fled for shame.

She herself, however, had never told Charlie an untruth. Except that she had not contradicted her brother outright when he had introduced her as a baroness, she had no complicity in any of his misrepresentations concerning her. Nay, Travers had introduced her as a baroness without any previous intimation of what he was about to do, and

this was at a time when Mabel could have no suspicions of his deep-laid designs that Charlie should fall in love with her.

Mabel's hotel was much frequented by American tourists. These active people, who came with stacks of luggage and letters of introduction by the packet, received shoals of English visitors in the public rooms, and debated their plans for each day's amusement as if they were haranguing from platforms, and intended their remarks to be taken down in shorthand. But there were hours of the day when the hotel was clear of them, and then Mabel had the palatial reading-room almost to herself. Having no private sitting-room, she spent a great deal of her time here, reading and watching the bustle of Northumberland Avenue from a seat near the window. She was careful to take her simple meals at times when the ladies' dining-room was nearly empty, and she found everybody very civil. Waiters generally are polite to pretty women who sit at table alone, and the foreign sort, who abound in grand hotels, are apt to be the most attentive of all.

Mabel had left Finsbury Park in obedience

to a telegram from her brother on the day when Mr. Harrowell's death was published in the papers—that is, on a Wednesday. During the first three days of her stay in the hotel, Travers came several times to see her, and to take her for walks in Regent Street or along the Embankment. He made her do a good deal of shopping, for he was not pleased with the articles of attire which she possessed. She must have, he said, new dresses, bonnets, mantles, and he seemed to care nothing about the cost, but was irritated at her buying black things. Seeing, however, that Mabel was no longer living among people who thought she had been a widow for some time, but was about to confess to Charles Harrowell that she had only just lost her husband, she considered it seemly to wear mourning. Travers gave in to the argument, but with bad grace.

This was in the days immediately preceding Mr. Harrowell's funeral. Travers often alluded to the alderman's death, but always in a hard, contemptuous way, saying that the old gentleman had long been out of his mind, and that his family were well rid

of him. This jarred upon Mabel, though she could not dissent, lest she should appear hypocritical.

Travers had a way of saying cynical things as though he were evincing moral courage by speaking aloud what others felt secretly. He affected to comment on Mr. Harrowell's character with the air of a man of the world, true to his own flesh and blood, but pretty callous to aught else; and the burden of his talk was always a congratulation on the splendid prospect that awaited the lady who was to become Mrs. Charles Harrowell.

Nevertheless, latent strife existed between the brother and sister on a subject which neither of them would broach. It exasperated Travers to think that Mabel was going to put her great chance in life to the hazard for the sake of quieting such a trifle of a thing as her conscience. For she could not avow the truth to Charlie without branding him—Travers—as a mendacious intriguer. The stories which Travers had related to Charlie about the Russian baron and the jointure were pure lies, and he had told more of them than was in any way necessary, for

his imagination was apt to run away with him. He turned over the falsehoods in his mind as a rogue examines bad money, to see if any of it will pass, but not a doit of it was likely to pass when rung deliberately upon the counter.

Once or twice Travers was sorely tempted to tell Mabel that it would be his ruin if she spoke, but something in her demeanour put him on his guard. There was an observant shyness about her which made him fear that, if he fluttered her conscience further, she might fly right away. He might return to the hotel some morning and find her gone. Curbing the anger which this reflection always raised in him, he took the prudent course of trying to ingratiate himself to the utmost with his sister, and he had need to employ but little art in this direction to make her most confiding and grateful. He could be so affectionate on occasions that she would lean on his arm with a full trust. People in the streets took them for a newly married couple.

The day of Mr. Harrowell's burial came, and in the afternoon Travers arrived at the

hotel elated. Mabel had expected to see him depressed by the dismal aspects of a funeral on a rainy day ; but he was full of his triumph in having been invited to stay alone with Charlie in Highbury Place, and, brimming over with inward satisfaction, he dashed at the subject which he and Mabel had till then avoided.

"I will bring Charlie to see you to-morrow," he said volubly ; "but I have been thinking, Mab dearest, that it would be better that what we have got to say about the past should come from me."

"Very well, dear, if you think so," said Mabel, raising her eyes on him unsuspectingly.

"It would spare your feelings," added Travers, in a considerate tone. "The confession is such a painful one that it almost requires a man's nerve to make it."

"Oh yes," sighed Mabel. "But you will conceal nothing, Chaunie ? There must not be the least tittle left that Mr. Harrowell might discover afterwards. Is not that your own conviction ?"

"Not quite," answered Travers, with a

gesture of denegation ; “ but I wish to consult your feelings, not my own rougher, and I fear more worldly, opinions. If the matter had been left to me, dearest, I should have said that a secret well-buried should be left undisturbed ; but I respect both your sentiments and your objects, and you may rely on me to act as a faithful interpreter of your wishes.”

“ Thank you, Chaunie,” replied Mabel, with feeling. “ And when will you tell Mr. Harrowell ? To-morrow ? ”

“ Not before you have seen him ; but perhaps in the evening, when we are alone together. You see, he has not renewed his offer since he became his own master. We must wait until he has done so, and then will be the time for me to speak.”

“ That is true,” admitted Mabel ; “ and if Mr. Harrowell should hesitate—if he should be offended—will you let me know at once ? ”

“ Certainly, dear ; and in that case I shall not mention his name again to you. My only task then will be to find some new retreat, in which you may live perfectly at

rest, untroubled by any of what you call my 'grand plans.'"

"It is very good of you, Chaunie," replied Mabel, looking at him kindly; for he had smiled as he uttered the last words, as if to banter her for her want of faith.

They were holding this conversation in the reading-room, where it was impossible for Mabel to give any rein to emotion. A waiter was classing newspapers on a table, a severe old lady was knitting, and a young American lady was inditing a letter, with a very determined sort of penmanship, to her Transatlantic friends. All three of these observers bent the eye of favour upon Travers, as being a highly *distingué*-looking man, and all three in their various ways admired the gallantry of his parting kiss to the pretty lady in black, who, by her mere manner of accepting this embrace, advertised herself as his sister.

Charlie Harrowell, accompanied by Travers, called on the afternoon of the next day, Sunday. This time the reading-room was full of people, for, as the weather was bad, our Transatlantic friends were keeping the

Sabbath holy by yawning and abusing the British climate. The visitors had to thread their way among rows of outstretched legs, and past more than one gentleman dozing in his leather arm-chair, with a copy of Saturday's newspaper on his lap.

At the first glance Mabel did not recognize Charlie in the tall, thin young man in deep mourning. When he stood over her, and stretched out a hand covered with a black glove,—when she beheld the ravages which a few days had wrought in him,—her heart filled with pity.

"I am so deeply grieved, Mr. Harrowell——" she began.

"It has been a cruel blow," he answered, seating himself on a chair opposite her; while Travers discreetly retired to forage among the newspapers.

"How is Miss Harrowell? I hope she and her sister are beginning to recover?"

"Thank you, yes. Ann and Lucy are staying in the country now. They both bore up better than I could have hoped; but, then, they had not the same reasons for despairing sorrow as I had."

“Of course you, as a man, had more to do and to bear,” she said.

“I was not thinking of that, but of my own conduct towards my poor father. Do you know, we parted, very coldly, if not in anger.”

“Why, surely, Mr. Harrowell, you were always an affectionate son!” expostulated Mabel, gently.

His rejoinder was to look at her, and shake his head. “I was at church this morning,” he proceeded, speaking as a man only speaks to one woman on earth outside his own family. “I went to our family pew in the old parish church of St. Mary’s—I had not been there for such a long time; not since last Christmas Day—and the vicar chose a text which seemed purposely meant for me. ‘*Could ye not watch with me one hour?*’ It was like my poor father speaking to me from the grave, and saying, ‘Could you not bear a little longer with my ways?’ Oh, how bitter it was to hear!”

“This self-condemnation is excessive,” pleaded Mabel. “What can you ever have done to make your father’s life unbearable?”

"Never mind," he said, and sinking his voice as he leaned forward confidentially. "The last time we met, Mabel, you said I was a boy. You won't deny that all this has been enough to change me into a man?"

"No," she murmured.

"Yet I am not changed in my feelings to you. If my father had returned the other day, I should have told him that I loved you, and now I repeat this to you, and add that I want you to help me lead a better life."

"Who am I that I should do that, Mr. Harrowell?" she breathed, almost inaudibly.

"You are as good as you are lovely," he answered. "I can read it in your eyes, and feel it in all your words. I know that I shall never be moved by you to anything that is not right. I shall have in you the best guide a man can have on earth—a good, God-fearing wife. You remember telling me that I ought to work. Well, I am not going to remain idle; but you shall, if you will, help in deciding me what to do in order that my life and my fortune may be useful to others. Then, when you have faith in my character, I will ask you to marry me."

“But you don’t know me, Mr. Harrowell,” she said, with mantling face and heaving breast. “Before you pledge yourself to me, will you ask my brother to tell you everything about my life?”

“He could tell me nothing that would alter my feelings,” replied Charlie. “If you have had sorrows, they will only make you the more dear to me. I know that you can never have been anything but what you are—a good, true, gentle, and most lovable little thing.”

“But you will ask my brother to tell you everything?” she repeated. “Please, ask him to-day, this very evening, to let you know all. Will you promise me?”

There was such an earnest supplication in her accents that he promised; but he was evidently not curious to hear what Chauncey Travers might have to say, and, as this gentleman joined them at that moment—having watched them while pretending to shade his eyes in examining some stereoscopic slides—the conversation lapsed on to desultory topics, till the light in the room became dim, and the street outside was

flecked with gas-jets, and the time arrived for separating.

But when Charles Harrowell was gone, Mabel could no longer feel indifference, nor anything like indifference, at the idea that he might never more return to her.

Love is born of a moment. As the striking of the spark, as the dropping of the wine that colours the water in the glass, as the swift plunging of the bird off the bough into mid-air, so it comes. At one moment it is not, though it may be visibly imminent ; the next moment it is an accomplished fact, and mostly irrevocable.

One must not imagine from what precedes that Mabel was insensible to the memory of the husband whom she supposed to be dead. But we must take human nature as it is. There are passions so strong that they weld two human beings together like metals in the smelting furnace, insomuch that there is no dividing them without crushing both. Mabel's love for Albert Snow had never been of such a character as that. It was a quiet affection, bred of mutual respect, which had ripened into a fireside tenderness ; but

such home plants cannot bear up against terrific blasts like that which had devastated Mabel's life, nor blossom again in the icy solitude of an eternal separation.

For years Mabel had been constrained to look upon her husband as lost to her. Her heart bled for him, her eyes were dim as they gazed at him behind those iron bars, yet he was no longer the same man to her. The common cares, labours, and hopes that keep two hearts bound together were wanting, and, little by little, as the tree ceases to shed its sap where the branch has been lopped off, Mabel's heart had grown, not hardened, but coated over with the merciful healing of time. It is so, and it must ever be so, for, if we keep our wounds open, we die of them.

Yet in her widowhood Mabel would have put herself in the way of no man's love, if she had been left to choose her own lot. This love of Charles Harrowell's had poured upon her unsought. It was unhopèd-for balm to her wounds; it came fresh and abundant, as the spring shower that makes green things grow again out of the frost-

bound barrenness. How could her heart not open to it ?

If nature had not decreed that the petal should uncloset to the dew and the soul to love, worldly experience must have taught the young widow that, unless she remarried, unending tides of new troubles would await her. As she had been wiled from her drunken father's lodgings towards Albert Snow's home, so now she could not but look wistfully through the golden gates which Charles Harrowell held open to her, into the peaceful garden-like retreat beyond.

A pretty woman without a mate can no more go through the world uncoveted than can a woman wearing rich jewels in a crowd, and, as Mabel had one of those faces that particularly fix the attention of men, she had been constantly employed in warding off courtships, some serious, some comical. Even during her short sojourn at Finsbury Park she had troubled the heart of a neighbouring fishmonger, one Mr. Brills, who had taken to presenting her every morning with a prime sole or a pair of whittings preparatory to a more explicit declaration of his feelings.

Add now the first throbbings of responsive love to the influences which urged Mabel towards Charlie, and think what an evening she spent, while pondering that her fate was being settled ! In her room she lay awake, counting the hours and the quarters that chimed musically from the clock tower of Westminster, and she tried to picture to herself what Charlie said, and what expression his face wore whilst he listened to her brother's story. At last the night was so far advanced that she knew all must be over ; then, wearied and resigned to God's will, whatever it might be, she fell asleep.





CHAPTER V.

DURING the forenoon she received this letter, which had been posted early :—

“DEAR M.,

“I could say nothing to C. last night, for he had caught a chill, and went to bed without dinner. The doctor was sent for, and, finding he had a little fever, ordered him to keep his room for a day or two. There is nothing serious. I will seize the first opportunity of doing what has been agreed upon.

“Affectionately,

“C. T.”

This letter told the truth. Weakened by seven days' excitement, Charlie had caught a chill at his father's funeral; and the cold,

after hanging about him for a day, declared itself in headache and pains in all the limbs. When Mr. Sheeves and Hugh Armstrong called on Monday morning to transact business with the new head of the Harrowell family, the latter lay in bed covered with blankets up to the chin, and with a wet bandage on his brow.

He was not alarmingly ill. He received his visitors, but he begged them in a languid voice to treat all their business through Travers.

“Mr. Travers is going to act as my agent and secretary. Please explain everything to him, and he will repeat it to me afterwards, when I am better.”

Hugh Armstrong's affairs could not be treated through Travers, so he went away. He had come to propose formally for Ann's hand, but this was truly mere ceremony, for he and Ann were in perfect understanding as to their marriage, and as to the date thereof, which was to be at the end of the year's mourning. Nor was any objection to be apprehended on Charlie's part, as he had always favoured his sister's engagement.

Mr. Sheeves went his way likewise. He knew nothing about Travers, but was impressed by this gentleman's ready comprehension of an executor's duties, the taking out letters of administration and so forth. He was, in fact, very glad to find such a sharp agent in possession of the house, giving orders to the servants, nursing Charlie, and prepared to do any kind of secretarial work ; for it was his plan to get young Harrowell down to Henley as soon as possible.

The father of three marriageable daughters, Mr. Sheeves, assisted by the meditations of Mrs. Sheeves, had naturally come to the conclusion that the inheritor of half a million ought to be made promptly acquainted with these damsels, who were all sufficiently fair to look upon.

"Poor fellow, he can't be allowed to remain in this horrible house ; it would be enough to give anybody the blues. As soon as he can leave his room, we will remove him to the country for a little fresh air."

"I am sure it will be the best thing for him," said Travers, thereby rooting himself in Mr. Sheeves's good opinion.

“ There’s really no business for him to do beyond signing a few papers,” continued the executor. “ The will is not going to be disputed, and as it leaves him this house with everything in it, we have no need to take an inventory. The tradesmen will be sending in their bills, and you won’t mind making out a list of them. Please open all letters addressed to the executors.”

Thus invested with a double authority, Travers was master of the house. The three servants were so thankful to him for coming to stay there, that they obeyed him with zeal, and he was very considerate with these three old maids, who esteemed him a most kind gentleman. How could they have dared sleep in the house with their young master ill and the ghost of poor old Mr. Harrowell apt to stalk about, if Mr. Travers had not come to take care of them ?

Eliza, having been bred in a Dorsetshire village, was a sound authority on ghosts. She informed her affrighted fellow-servants that a suicide must always be buried at four cross-roads with a stake through his body, which was the only way of laying the ghost,

and that unless this had been privately done with Mr. Harrowell (which she still piously hoped might have been the case), he would certainly return to haunt the scene of his self-murder. The servants were afraid to go upstairs singly after dark. They groped to the coal-cellar in pairs, the postman's double-knock made them jump, and, even in the kitchen, when the gas was lighted, each one quaked to be left alone.

Such an existence was unendurable for three old maids. As they were now pensioned, they intended to leave service; and Eliza was deputed to act as spokeswoman with Travers, to the end that he might break the news to Mr. Charles, and prevent offence being taken. This Travers cheerfully undertook to do, and the sort of intimacy that sprung up between him and Eliza, in consequence, led to several conversations, in which the old servant related all the circumstances attending Mr. Harrowell's suicide.

Thus Travers learned how Charlie's hand-bag had been missed, and how a waterproof had been found in the closet which nobody had known as belonging to her master—a

clear proof, according to her, that her master must have bought it on the day before his death with a deliberate eye to what he was going to do.

“And to think of poor master having gone to church on Sunday morning as usual, sir, and having read prayers in the evening to Jemima and Maria—it being my Sunday out, sir, and I not home till eleven through having friends who live a good way off at Battersea! Just think of his having read prayers, sir, as if nothing was going to happen!”

It relieved Eliza to discuss these things with Mr. Travers as she waited upon him at breakfast and dinner; for she was much too proper a servant to talk them over with anybody outside the family circle. The postman, the potman, and a certain policeman who had a jocular way with him when gossiping with servants through the area railings, had all sought in vain to get scraps of information from her.

Charlie remained nearly a week in his room; for the doctor was not sure but that he might be sickening for a serious illness.

It took him three days to find out that the case was only one of influenza, though it must be said that the patient's low spirits and his indisposition to read, talk, or rouse himself in any way, contributed to the prolongation of doubt.

Mr. Sheeves called every morning to report what he had done the day before, and he gave Travers a great deal of work to do in routing out papers to discover if some of the tradesmen's bills that were sent in had not been already paid. No task could have suited Travers better, and, while Charlie lay dozing one day after another, there was not a drawer, cupboard, or room in the house but his agent and secretary explored.

Yes; he roamed even through the room where Mr. Harrowell had died. But this was during the small hours of the night, when nobody could surprise him turning a key softly in the lock of the late Mrs. Harrowell's jewel-case (he quickly closed the lid again, for the modest trinkets were not worth his attention), or holding that mysterious waterproof in his hands with such an odd frowning look of scrutiny and hesitation.

It may be wondered that Charlie should have placed such confidence in his friend as to leave all keys and papers in his hands, and Travers himself marvelled somewhat at this. For it was he who had given the advice of rebelliousness and deceitfulness towards Charlie's father, which the conscience-stricken orphan now so bitterly repented at having followed; and it would not have surprised Travers had he been reproached for the counsels which he had instilled.

But it is only base natures that will turn upon the givers of well-meant advice which has been accepted. Charlie did not hold Travers for a saint, but he believed in his friendship—and then, he was Mabel's brother, which covered all. On himself solely must rest the fault of having sought counsel that led him astray, and Charlie meant to bear his punishment alone.

But now what was the object that Chauncey Travers was pursuing? Nobody can suppose that the man's mind was calm, though his exterior was so collected. The craftiest plotters have always to reckon with

unexpected incidents that come athwart their schemes, just as they may be assisted by unforeseen luck. The unexpected element of contrariety in Travers's way was Mr. Ramshart ; the unhoped-for luck was Charlie's indisposition and Travers's secure installation at Highbury Place, which enabled him to spy upon all letters that came into the house and to repel all visitors.

While Charlie was confined to his room, Travers did not leave the house for a minute. Every time the postman knocked, every time the door-bell rang, he expected either a letter or a personal call from Mr. Ramshart. Not for a moment did he imagine that the curate was going to sit down satisfied under the astounding denials which had been flung at him in the cemetery. In some way or other, Mr. Ramshart would work to find out the truth, and when he had detected it, he would come forward with proofs to confound his adversary.

This danger was so pressing that Travers asked himself, with inward consternation, how he could have parried it, had he not been invited to reside in the Harrowell's house ?

Mr. Ramshart neither wrote nor called, but his silence was more disquieting than precipitate action, for it seemed to indicate that he was taking his time only to collect evidence irrefutable. It therefore became urgent that Charlie should hear Mabel's history from Travers himself, before Mr. Ramshart appeared again on the scene. Fain would Travers have avoided the exposure, but without Mabel's own help, he saw not how. The truth must be confessed, or, like a live coal burning its way through over-heaped cinders, it would reveal itself. The only question was whether Travers should speak out forthwith or first contrive to get a large sum of young Harrowell's money into his possession, so that he might abscond if the structure of falsehoods and fraud which he had built up cracked suddenly, in a way to presage total collapse.

Money was being piled up round Charlie in mounds, so to say, but it was like those tantalizing displays in the shop windows of changers. Travers could see it through the plate-glass, but not touch. By getting round the counter—that is, by continuing in Charlie's

confidence—he might gradually be trusted with the fingering of the whole, but otherwise he could not lay hand on a single gold piece without an act of breakage or a swindle. How he would have rejoiced to hear that Mr. Ramshart had broken his neck! It was only this man who might stretch out the foot that would trip him up just as he reached the goal. At moments his excitement impelled him to go and tell part of the truth to the curate, and to make an appeal to his Christian compassion on Mabel's behalf.

One morning Charlie came down to breakfast in his dressing-gown and slippers. He was not yet well enough to go out, but he was tired of lying abed, and was anxious to make a start in his new life, if only by looking over the business documents that would tell him how much he was worth. His affairs were well-nigh settled, and the bankers had informed him that he could draw cheques on his late father's account. Mr. Sheeves was to call in the course of the day, and to ask him whether he proposed to remain a partner in the tea firm, or to sell out his interest.

“ I don't understand tea,” he said listlessly,

stirring his cup as he discussed the subject with Travers; "but I suppose I had better remain a sleeping partner, as the investment is a good one. For the rest, I have been reflecting a great deal, and am inclined to carry out my father's intention of buying an estate and settling down on it. I cannot see that I am fit for anything else, but in a few years I might become a passable landlord."

"See a little of the world before you make up your mind," suggested Travers. "Why don't you travel?"

"I was coming to that," said Charlie. "I have not much taste for the visit to Henley which our good friend Sheeves proposes. My fancy is to see Europe, and perhaps take that famous journey to China which was lately so repugnant to me. Does such a trip tempt you?"

"I am afraid I have business of my own to attend to," answered Travers, too sharp to close on the spot with Charlie's offer. "My *Cheapside Mail* can't be left to take care of itself."

"You might appoint an acting editor,

though." And then, without any fuss, Charlie proposed the very thing which Travers was meditating to ask him as a favour. He recalled with great tact some allusions which Travers had occasionally made to his want of the capital necessary to push his paper, and he volunteered to become co-proprietor of the *Mail* by paying a lump sum down.

"It's really very kind of you," replied Travers, keeping his exultation under control. "With capital I could make the paper pay in no time, and you would get a handsome return on your investment."

"How much would you require?"

"My plan would be to convert the *Mail* into a daily evening paper. To set up in a new office with our own presses and a complete staff, would cost about twenty-five thousand pounds.

"That is not much out of such a large fortune as my poor father has left me," remarked Charlie. "Well, if you're willing, I am, and you can draw up a deed of partnership. But that reminds me that we have some other business to settle. Will you come into the study, and I'll give you a

cheque for the money which I borrowed of Mr. Hilary Cocking."

They passed from the breakfast table into the study, and Charlie, seated at his father's table, filled up the first cheque which he had ever drawn in his life. When he had torn it from the counterfoil he wrote out another, payable to Travers, for a thousand pounds, and, handing the mauve paper to his friend with a smile, said—

"Isn't it usual to pay a deposit on entering into partnership, just to prove good faith?"

"As you please," laughed Travers, with his customary coolness. "It's very good of you."

"You shall have the rest as soon as you are ready to begin operations. When will that be?"

"Immediately, so far as I am concerned; but it depends on you. Do you wish me to accompany you on your travels?"

"The matter lies thus," said Charlie, who, rising from his chair, placed a hand on Travers's shoulder, and turned his face towards the full-length portrait of Mrs. Harrowell. "Do you see, that is my mother's

portrait, and it is the only thing I mean to keep of the furniture in this house."

"Are you going to sell, then?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes, I cannot live here; and I want you to do one of two things for me. Either come abroad with me—which is what I should prefer—or else, if you stay in London to give your paper its fresh start, please remain in this house, to see it sold, with all its furniture, and hand over the proceeds to the hospitals."

"That is a large order," observed Travers.

"I do not think the house will fetch much," replied Charlie; "but whatever be the amount, I wish it to be laid out as I have said. And now I'll just go upstairs and put on some other clothes, against Mr. Sheeve's coming.

Mr. Sheeves came soon afterwards, and with him Hugh Armstrong, fresh from Henley, with a happy look on his tanned face, and his big limbs lounging easily in a tweed suit. Both asked after Charlie's health, and then Mr. Sheeves, drawing a packet of papers from his pocket, consulted a memorandum.

“Mr. Travers, would you attend to this matter? I find that Alderman Harrowell cashed a cheque for five hundred pounds at his bank on the day before his death. Has any such sum been discovered in the house, or any note about it among the papers?”

“No. I am told that a five-pound note was in Mr. Harrowell's pocket-book, but we have found no money in the house.”

Charlie, who came down at that moment, confirmed this. He had himself examined all the drawers and desks, and found no money.

“Your father may have paid away the money on the day he drew it,” said Mr. Sheeves; “but it is too large a sum to remain unaccounted for, and we ought to make inquiries. Do you know all the tradespeople with whom your father dealt?”

“I think I do; but Ann certainly does. He dealt with the same shops for years; but I believe his more important bills were only paid once a year, at Christmas.”

“And you are not aware of your father having made any expensive purchases of late?”

“No. That is to say, he set up a carriage a month or two ago, and he may have been buying new horses, for all I know.”

“Perhaps that’s it,” said Mr. Sheeves. “Here, in any case, is a list with the numbers of the notes ; and if the coachman cannot give us any information, we must look through the papers more carefully.”

Whilst he was speaking, Hugh Armstrong, being one of those long-limbed men who like to sit on window-sills or tables rather than on chairs, had hoisted himself on to the top of a cupboard about four feet high, that stood in one of the recesses near the chimney-piece. In doing this he upset a pile of papers, and with them there tumbled to the floor a black leather bag.

“Hullo, that is my bag!” exclaimed Charlie, pointing with wonder at the article.

“What bag?” asked Hugh, mumbling an apology as he stooped to pick up the papers.

“Why, the bag which disappeared so mysteriously,” answered Charlie. “What can have made father bring it in here? It’s full of papers, too.”

“You had better look through them, and

see if they are important," opined Mr. Sheeves.

"No; they are only business circulars," said Charlie, examining them. "It is strange, though, that neither of my sisters nor I should have found this bag before. I thought we had ransacked every corner of the room."

"It was hidden under a heap of papers," remarked Travers. And no more was said on the subject, for just at this moment there was a knock at the house-door—a single full-stop-like knock,—and shortly afterwards Eliza came in, saying to her master—

"If you please, sir, a policeman wants to see you."

"Shall I go and speak to him?" proposed Travers, quickly.

"He may as well come in," answered Charlie. And Eliza thereupon beckoned to a police sergeant, who strode in, made a salute, and unpinned a little paper parcel which contained a latch-key.

"Begging your pardon, sir; but this key was found in Upper Street, Islington, on the morning of Monday week last, and brought

to the police-station. As it's a patent safety key, with a number on it, we took it to the maker's, and the name opposite the number on the books was Mr. Thomas Harrowell at this address."

"Why, this must be the latch-key I lost," exclaimed Charlie, with an air of stupefaction.

"When did you lose it?" asked Hugh Armstrong.

"On the Friday evening, the day before we went to Taplow," said Charlie. "You remember, Travers, we dined at Richmond together, and the last time I felt the key in my pocket I was seated with you."

"Possibly you dropped it on your way home?" rejoined Travers.

"I might have dropped it in the cab," acknowledged Charlie; "but it couldn't have lain in the road till the Monday morning."

"Oh no, sir!" interrupted the sergeant. "With all the traffic there is in Upper Street, the key couldn't have lain above a few minutes in the road without being run over, and you see there ain't a mark on it. The key was found quite early on Monday morning, by a printer returning home from

his night's work in a newspaper office. He put it into his pocket, and forgot all about it till a few days ago, when he brought it to us."

"That Monday morning was the time when my father died," remarked Charlie, in a low, startled voice.

"Very mysterious, I must say," observed Mr. Sheeves.

"I dare say you dropped it in the cab, and the cabman, having picked it up, lost it in his turn on the Monday morning." This was Travers's suggestion.

"That point, however, could be cleared up," observed Hugh Armstrong, evidently moved to a serious interest. "You could advertise for the cabman who drove you home, and we can question the man who found the key. The constable will give us his address."

"Yes, I'll write it down," said the sergeant.

There was an entire silence in the room while this formality was being accomplished; then Charlie gave the man a sovereign, thanked him, and sent him away. Hugh Armstrong had meanwhile taken up the list

of the notes which Alderman Harrowell had drawn from the bank, and was copying them into his own note-book.

"There may be something in all this," he ejaculated, reflectively; "but now, Charlie, can I speak with you for a moment alone?"

"I will say good-bye first," exclaimed Mr. Sheeves, "for I must be off. I shall see you again to-morrow, Charlie. Mr. Travers, you'll look through all the papers carefully, won't you?"

Charlie and Hugh Armstrong vanished into the dining-room together, and Travers remained alone in the study. The hue of his face was livid, and he twice wiped his brow and hands with his silk handkerchief. For a few minutes he stood breathing quickly, almost panting; then, with stealthy steps, he crept into the passage, and laid his ear close to the door of the dining-room.

At first he could hear nothing; but of a sudden sounds of laughter broke out, at which Travers's anxious face cleared, and, with a sigh of relief, he returned to the study.

A few moments later Hugh Armstrong

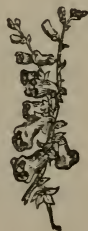
returned, preceding Charlie, shook hands with Travers pretty heartily, like a man in high spirits, and left the house. Then Charlie, whose face wore a smiling expression for a moment, announced that Hugh had proposed for Ann Harrowell's hand, and had been making some jokes about settlements—"which puts me in mind that I, too, am to be married some day," he added. "Do you mind telling me now what it is that Mabel was so extremely desirous that you should communicate to me about herself."

"Well, not now," answered Travers, whose nerves were in no state to make such a communication. "I think I ought to be going to the city now. I've not been out for several days. This evening, if you like."

But while he spoke it flashed upon him again that he dared not go out, leaving the secret undisclosed. Mr. Ramshart might call during his absence, and spoil everything. In desperation he resolved to fight his way out of the corner there and then.

"No, on second thoughts, I will tell you now," he said, glancing at his watch. He

closed the door, made a sign to Charlie to be seated, and sat down near him. "My poor Mabel," he began, "has been all her life the victim of cruel misfortune. She is the widow of a man who was unjustly convicted of murder, and who died in prison."





CHAPTER VI.

So Charlie Harrowell learned the story of Mabel's life, or at least as much of it as Travers deemed it necessary to tell. He learned that Mabel was the daughter of a drunken father, who had been murdered, and the widow of a convict, who had been condemned for killing her father. But he learned also that there was a strong presumption in favour of Albert Snow's innocence, and that Tobias Ramshart was one of those who believed the convict to have been guiltless.

Travers slurred over those points which offered difficulties. Thus he explained Mabel's title of Baroness de la Neva by saying that her husband was of foreign extraction, and had anglicized his name into "Snow" for professional purposes.

With regard to Mabel's having kept a shop, he said that, although she had a sufficient jointure, she had determined to consecrate her whole fortune to establishing her husband's innocence. Lastly, Travers antedated the time of Albert Snow's death a little, for it shrewdly occurred to him that Charlie would not seek elucidation on all the points from Mabel herself. He would either accept her whole story in a block, or else declare at once that he could not marry a convict's widow, and in that case investigations would be superfluous.

But Travers was speaking to a young man in love, and his luck befriended him. As Charlie listened, at first with stupefaction, then with kindling pity, his mind did not fasten upon details, but fixed itself on the central fact of Mabel's incredibly miserable life, her hopeless widowhood, and her cankering anxieties. He remembered well enough that she had never deceived him, and never encouraged his suit.

"Whatever deception has been practised has come from me," said Travers, nobly; "but what could I do?"

What, indeed, could he do? Ought he to have gone about introducing his sister to everybody as a convict's wife? Charlie's generosity spurned the idea, and he blamed Travers for nothing.

His heart was quite overflowing with compassion for Mabel, and the first words which he uttered when Travers at length paused for a reply, were, "Assure Mabel of my unalterable love." Then, lest this verbal message should seem too cold, he spontaneously wrote this letter :—

"DEAREST MABEL,

"Your brother has told me everything, and my pity for you passes all power of expression. Be assured of my inextinguishable love. But under these new circumstances you will see that I ought to reflect for a day or two on what had best be done for our joint interests—yours and mine. My present thought is, that if you will accept the offer which I now most solemnly renew, and become my wife, we ought to go and live abroad—say in America—where nothing will ever remind you of your past sufferings.

My own dearest, how much you have gone through, and what a reparation destiny owes you henceforth in a life of untroubled happy days !

“ The doctor will not allow me to go out to-day, else I would hurry to you this instant, but I will call on you to-morrow or the next day, as I am feeling much stronger. After seeing you, I will go into the country for a day or two, and tell my sisters what I have heard, as I know you would desire me to do. As they are both good, warm-hearted girls, I am sure they will be on our side ; but should this not be the case, remember that their opinions cannot control my actions. My darling, do not doubt that I will ever be true to you, and love you through life to death with all my heart and soul, according to this my faithful promise.

“ Your devoted

“ CHARLES HARROWELL.”

This was a chivalrous letter. It was the outpouring of a nature not roughened by contact with the world, the effusion of a fresh heart, in which the springs of sensibility

were abundant. Worldly old men would have called it the letter of a young fool, and kindly old men would have shaken their heads over the imprudence of it. But Charlie would not have recalled that letter for all the advice that worldly wisdom might have offered, though, having written it, he threw Travers into some consternation by announcing that he would go to Henley. The expediency of consulting Charlie's two sisters and Hugh Armstrong did not seem at all obvious to Travers. However, he did not attempt opposition.

"You will go now and carry this letter to Mabel yourself, won't you?" said Charlie, with eagerness. "If I were not so weak I would go with you."

"Don't venture it to-day," answered Travers, walking into the hall and brushing his hat; "you will be stronger soon."

"I suppose you couldn't bring back Mabel with you?" asked Charlie, wistfully. "As you are her brother, she might come to see me in your company, especially as I have been ill, you know."

"Why not? I will bring her back,"

replied Travers, smiling at his friend's impatience.

"Will you? How long will you be away? I will tell Eliza to have some tea ready."

"I will not keep you waiting too long; but with ladies, you see, there's no reckoning on time. And now, Charlie," added Travers, facing about as he neared the house door, "one question before we part. You don't think the worse of me for having concealed Mabel's story from you?"

"My dear fellow, what an idea! How could you have done differently? Bring Mabel here—that is all I ask. And, I say, Travers" (this was spoken as Travers opened the door), "try and persuade Mabel that we ought to be married soon. Why should there be a long delay?"

Thereupon Travers walked out. He was rid of all fear, and could have faced Mr. Ramshart without quailing—nay, could have laughed in his face if they had met. So great was his relief, that he felt ashamed of the terror which had oppressed him. Was not Charlie a mere boy in love, and why should he have been so afraid of him?

Against Mabel, too, was Travers incensed. It was she who had compelled him to stake all his fortune on a confession to Charlie; and albeit he was glad now that the avowals had been made,—glad also that he could return to Mabel with a proud look, and tell her that her wishes had been accomplished,—he made up his mind that her squeamishness should no more put him in such torturing predicaments. He saw success all clear before him now, if only Mabel would consent to an early marriage, and agree she must.

Mabel had been waiting in deep anxiety for news from Charlie. The prolongation of her suspense was the more dreadful as it was caused by Charlie's illness, and she imagined the illness to be more serious than was really the case. Her brother had only sent her a few scrappy notes to say that Charlie was still in bed, but that there was not much the matter with him. This, however, might be only a blind. If Charlie were not very ill he would write to her himself instead of sending his love through another—so Mabel thought.

Alone in the large hotel, without so much

as a maid for companionship, afraid to be drawn into casual acquaintanceship with frequenters of the reading-room, not daring to go out for more than half an hour at a time lest Travers should call while she was away, and trembling every time she returned lest some grievous letter should be awaiting her, Mabel led a shrinking, miserable life. Sometimes she persuaded herself that Charlie must have been told of her secret, and had been alienated by the disclosure, but that her brother scrupled to tell her so. As this was but too probable, she ceased to expect anything but bad news, and was resigned to the worst by the time her brother came to see her.

She was in her bedroom. Travers sent up a message to say that he wished her to come out for a walk with him, and, when she descended to the reading-room, he simply handed her Charlie's letter.

He gave no smile to prepare her for its contents, and he sat down silently while she read. With a mantling face and a half-suppressed cry of emotion, she held the paper, but could not speak. For two or

three minutes she remained, and then passed it to her brother.

“ I have read it,” he said, putting it away from him. “ You see, Mabel, this young fellow is very fond of you ; but do you love *him* ? ”

“ He is a noble-hearted young man. How can I show him my gratitude for this ? ” answered Mabel, her voice quavering.

“ You can show it by consenting to his wishes, and getting married to him with as little delay as possible. Let there be no resistance on your part, or you will be sorry for it.”

“ Oh, Chaunie, dare I take advantage of a generous impulse like this ? And he so young too ! ” exclaimed Mabel, who was distracted between doubt and her unexpected joy.

“ At present you have unbounded influence over Charlie Harrowell,” answered Travers. “ The question is, whether you will let him go astray from you into the world, where he will be assailed by all sorts of temptations. If you mean well by him, now is the time to prove it by not deserting him.”

"If I only could think that I should make him happy!" murmured Mabel.

"It ought to be enough for you that he thinks so. But come and let him speak to you himself. I have promised that I would take you to see him this afternoon, and I know he will be counting the minutes till you arrive."

Mabel rose obediently, though the proposal took her aback. But Travers did not speak as though he offered her any option, and Mabel was pleased at heart to let herself be guided. Was it not natural, too, that she should obey the summons of one who was to be her master thenceforth? By her manner of rising, she signified her acquiescence in anything that might be proposed. She was not going to struggle against her own happiness. Out of the depths of despair she had suddenly seen the gates of an earthly paradise opened to her, and she would have been more or less than a woman if she had not tottered forward towards the hand that was beckoning her.

And Mabel showed herself to be a daughter of Eve in this, that, in following

her brother, she passed before a looking-glass for a moment to adjust her bonnet, and debated within herself as to whether this head-dress was quite as becoming as another which she had upstairs.

"I think, if you don't mind waiting a moment, Chaunie, I will put on something else," she said. And Travers, who knew the sex, was not surprised that she remained absent twenty minutes, and returned with an undefinable smartening of everything about her. Her widow's cap was very small—a mere piece of ruching, but somehow it looked vastly well under her princess bonnet. She turned pink as her brother's critical eye ran over her attire; but even his fastidious taste was pleased, and he felt proud of her.

"Charlie has not been very ill, has he?" asked Mabel, as a hansom was taking them towards Highbury.

"He has nothing the matter with him now but what you can cure," replied Travers, remarking with pleasure that she used the name Charlie of her own accord. "But I mean by this that you must join in making him obey doctor's orders. They say that he ought to go on a sea journey."

"Why? Is his chest affected?" asked Mabel, with a pang.

"I don't think so; but his nervous system has received a shock. He proposes himself that you and he should settle in America; but as he will not go away without you, it will rest with you to determine when he shall recover full health."

He could not have said anything better calculated to arouse Mabel's anxiety, and so draw her into compliance with Charlie's wishes. That is why he said it. A few minutes later, when the cab stopped, Charlie, who had been looking out of the window, ran to open the door himself, and simply took her in his arms. Under the fervour of his embrace she could say nothing, so he led her upstairs to the drawing-room, overcome and silent, but happy.

"And now I'll leave you two young people alone," said Travers. "I have some writing to do downstairs, and will return when I am wanted."

The door had hardly closed when Charlie clasped Mabel to him again, gazing fondly into her face, and stroking her forehead.

"It is so good of you to have come, dearest. I was half afraid you would not."

"Charlie, I have been so miserable at your illness," she sighed; "but you are better now?"

"Oh yes. But do not let us speak of the past, Mabel. If you agree to it, all that is gone by shall be a sealed book between us. We will look only to the time before us, which can be made so happy if you will."

So he put her not a question that could stir any sad remembrance. They sat for an hour together, and he discussed his plan of going to America, and buying a large estate there. He mentioned that the doctors thought he should have a change of air and scene, and this seemed to confirm Travers's remark that his complete return to health would depend on her. Could she allow him to go abroad alone, while she remained in England? Sitting beside him there, with his hands clasping hers and his eyes beaming on her with love, she knew that the fortitude for this was not in her, nor would it have been in any woman.

Eliza came in with a tea-tray, and Charlie,

in the exuberance of his heart, introduced Mabel to his old servant.

"Eliza, this is Mrs. Snow, Mr. Travers's sister. I hope she will be a closer relation of my own soon."

"I'm very glad to hear it, ma'am," said Eliza, with a quick but favourable glance at Mabel's winsome face. "Ah, Mr. Charles, you couldn't do better than get a good wife, sir."

"But mind, this is a secret for the present, Eliza."

"Yes, sir; you can trust me, sir," answered Eliza,—who, however, lost no time in communicating the news, under strict promise of secrecy, to her two fellow-servants.

Travers at last returned unbidden, and Mabel had to say good-bye; but she went under promise of returning next day, to luncheon. In the interval, Mr. Sheeves called, and Charlie was sorely tempted to tell him of his betrothal; but he restrained himself, thinking it was proper that his sisters should be apprised in the first instance. But he gladdened Mr. Sheeves by promising to go down to Henley on the following Saturday

and stay till Monday. The good man vowed *in petto* that Charlie's visit should last much longer than two days if his wife and his three comely daughters could do anything to this end ; and he meant to spare no pains in his hospitalities.

Mabel, after lunching with Charlie—her brother being, of course, present,—spent a whole afternoon with him. He took her over the house, showed her his mother's portrait, and in all that he said and did he gained a stronger hold over her every moment. So did she over him. Their hearts were made to be joined together. There grew up a full understanding between them, and all shyness vanished from their intercourse.

She returned the next day, and by that time it was quite settled that they should be married soon, and go abroad for a long tour before starting for America. The delay of three months, at first suggested, had been gradually cut down to one month, and even this time was beginning to seem long to them both. Their love was turning to a consuming passion. Mabel's affection for her

husband had never been of this romantic kind, and all the sensations that possessed her mind and heart, almost painful in their ecstasy, were new to her. She thrilled at Charlie's embrace, and clung to him with a yearning to become his wife.

She was yielding to her destiny, secure in the feeling that whatever Charlie might hear about her in the future would not shake his allegiance. His trusting love had put away all fear and shame from her. No wonder she clung to him.

Thinking of him day and night, and always longing to be near him, it was a sorrow to her that she was going to be separated from him even for two days, and on the day before his departure for Henley she could not conceal her low spirits.

"You will be back by an early train on Monday?" she said, as they were pacing arm-in-arm in the garden behind the house.

"Won't I? And I'll drive straight to your hotel, luggage and all."

"Could you not telegraph to me on Sunday to tell me what your sisters have said? I shall be so anxious."

"I will, if you like; but you need not be afraid of them."

"I cannot help being afraid, Charlie; it will be so much to me to have their good opinion."

"Well, you may rest assured they will do as I wish, darling; but you are not going to let anything they may do or say come between us?"

"Oh no," she answered, almost wildly, as he drew her head on to his shoulder. "Things have gone too far. I could not leave you now, Charlie. It would kill me."

The doctor had now allowed Charlie to go out, and as the weather was fine and warm, Mabel consented to go for a walk. A whim had seized upon Charlie to see the shop where Mabel had served as post-mistress, and she, smiling at the wish, let him bend his steps in that direction. He promised that he would not go into the place; only look at it from a distance, while she entered and shook hands with her friend Madge Rose. She had once or twice let fall a remark showing that some of the most peaceful days of her widowhood had been

spent in that shop, and that was why Charlie wanted to see it.

"That is the house," said Mabel, as soon as they came in sight of the stationer's shop. "How surprised Madge will be to see me!"

Madge was astonished indeed. "Why, Mrs. Snow, can that be you?" she exclaimed, running from behind the counter. "And looking so happy too!"

"I am happy, Madge."

"Then there's been nothing wrong?"

"Nothing wrong."

"Tell me, now,—you are going to be married, aren't you, Mrs. Snow?"

"Yes, I am," laughed Mabel, blushing.

"There, didn't I say so all along?" cried Madge, clapping her hands. "And what is he like—young, handsome, a real gentleman? Oh, do tell me!"

A "humph" from a corner of the shop reminded Madge that there was a witness to this interview.

"Oh, I quite forgot!" she ejaculated, turning from her kissing of Mabel. "This is the lady who has been sent here from St. Martin's-le-Grand to take your place: Miss Barbottle."

"How do you do?" said Mabel, bowing to the plain-faced young lady in question, who was making up accounts.

"Good-day," answered Miss Barbottle, frostily, and went on with her reckoning.

Madge Rose had so much to say, and knew that she would have so little time to say it in, that she began chatting as volubly as though she had just been released from a two-hours' spell of silence in church service, but she was soon interrupted by the sound of a heavy fall and much clattering on the staircase behind the shop parlour, the whole interspersed with some incoherent masculine swearing.

"Oh, that's the inspector again!" she said, with a shake of the head. "He's our only trouble."

"Inspector Dadge?" asked Mabel, wondering.

"Yes, Mrs. Snow. He drinks, and his behaviour's dreadful. Just hark at him!"

Inspector Dadge was swearing with all the power of his lungs at somebody who had left a tin pail on the staircase, whereby he had come (to use his own words) a "blooming cropper." Instead of passing out of the

private part of the house through the private door, he kicked open the parlour door, and strode in blustering.

"There's that d——d slavey been up to her old tricks. It usen't to be so in Mrs. Snow's time."

He stopped short, perceiving Mrs. Snow herself. His purple, congested face passed from an expression of fury to one of amazement, and with an unsteady hand he made a salute.

"How do you do, inspector?" said Mabel, gravely.

"Lor, ma'am, is that you? I beg pardon," stuttered Inspector Dadge. "I hope I see you well, ma'am?"

Mabel bent her head.

"I had a fall on the stairs, that's why I spoke a bit hasty; but I beg pardon, ma'am."

Receiving no answer, the inspector made another clumsy bow, closed the door softly, and retired. But coming round to the front of the shop, he took his stand in the middle of the road, evidently wanting to speak to Mabel. This made her hasten her departure, greatly to Madge's chagrin, and she could

only pacify that young lady by a vague promise that she would let her know when the wedding was coming off, and perhaps invite her.

Leaving the shop, Mabel was at once accosted by the inspector. Tipsy as he was—for as to his condition there could be no doubt—she did not recoil from him, but waited quietly for what he had to say.

“Excuse my talking to yer in the street, ma’am ; but a gent was here inquiring after you. I didn’t tell him anything till I learned he was your friend, and meant yer no ’arm. It was Mr. Ramshart.”

“Yes, Mr. Ramshart is my friend.”

“That’s right then, ma’am—all as it should be ; but he wanted very partickler to know your address.”

“It is of no use my giving you my address, for I shall soon be going away,” said Mabel.

“Shan’t I, then, ever see you here again, ma’am ?”

“Perhaps you will never see me again.”

Inspector Dadge lurched a little, drew himself up, and seemed puzzled in a groggy sort of way.

"I'm sorry for that, ma'am—downright sorry. But there ain't no ill-will between us, is there? It wasn't my evidence that got *him* convicted, was it? Poor gentleman! we was all sorry for him, as I told you; but what I always say is, it's no good injuring the living to please the dead. Ain't that true?"

"I don't understand you," answered Mabel.

"Enough said." muttered the inspector. "Maybe I'd say more if it could help, but it can't. Good-bye, ma'am." And he turned on his heel, sobered enough perhaps to feel ashamed to himself.

When Mabel joined Charlie, he asked banteringly who was her friend? She could have no secrets from him now, and told him who Inspector Dadge was, and what he had been saying.

"My darling, we must get you away from these scenes," he exclaimed, with a gush of compassion. "I am longing for my visit to Henley to be over, so that we may have nothing but our wedding to think of, and then to go away to quite a new life."



CHAPTER VII.

Two princesses could not have been more hospitably entertained than were Ann and Lucy Harrowell at Mr. Sheeves's country house. Let it be hoped they would have been as tenderly cared for if they had not been worth a penny apiece. It was surely from no sordid motive that Mrs. Sheeves gave up to them the two best bedrooms, plied them with the choicest of viands and of wines, and instructed all her children, the grown up and those in the nursery, to speak to them in soft tones.

“Poor dear girls! they have just lost their father, and are heart-broken. My own heart aches for them.”

Mrs. Sheeves and her lord had been obliged to turn out from one of the two fine bedrooms, but this self-denial cost the good

lady nothing. Her only fear was lest the sheets should not be fine enough or the attendance of the servants sufficiently brisk. Half a dozen times a day she ran upstairs to ask the dear girls whether they were perfectly comfortable, and if the house was as quiet as they wished it.

She had locked up all the rackets and tennis-balls, so that there should be no unseemly playing in the garden; and her three youngest little girls walked out staidly with their governess, under strict orders not to raise their voices until they were beyond ear-shot of the house. Master Archibald Sheeves, aged three, was never so near to being whipped in his life as when he was discovered chasing a pet goose over the lawn, and uttering wild cries to scare that truant bird towards its domicile.

"Oh, you naughty boy, you! What did I tell you about making a noise? I shall send your father to you with the horsewhip as soon as he returns from London. You'll see if I don't."

"Let him play, Mrs. Sheeves," said Ann, who overheard this admonition. "They are

all such good children, and Archie is a great favourite of mine."

"It is so kind of you, my dear Ann. There, children, did you hear what Miss Harrowell said? You may play, but very quietly, mind." This was addressed to her younger children, who were standing rather ruefully on a gravel path with a feeling of its being Sunday upon them.

The tennis-balls and rackets were unlocked after that, and games were resumed, though in a somewhat constrained fashion at first, till Hugh Armstrong came down from London, and set all things on a proper footing. Ann and Lucy did not want to spoil anybody's pleasure. Their hearts had been so cruelly seared that they could not bear any exposure of their wounds, and sympathy when given too lavishly invites exposure. Patients must not be kept too long in a darkened room, with nurses saying "Hush!" and officious hands meddling every moment with their bandages.

Hugh Armstrong was the first to bring back colour to Ann's cheeks and a smile to her lips, and very sharp was Mrs. Sheeves's

pang when she discovered why these two young people enjoyed each other's company so much. But, there was no help for it. Hugh put up at an hotel, but he had to be invited to dinner every day, and to be made free of the house; and when he went back to his newspaper work in London (for he had to write several leaders a week for the *Express*), it was on the understanding that he should return to Henley, whilst Ann remained there, from every Saturday till Monday.

Mrs. Sheeves consoled herself with the reflection that Lucy Harrowell was unengaged, and might be tempted to confer her well-dowered hand, either upon Bob (Robert) Sheeves, a clerk in the War Office, or upon Julian Sheeves, a lieutenant in the South Oxfordshire Fusiliers. Charlie Harrowell, too, was heart-free so far as Mrs. Sheeves knew, and he must be a very unsusceptible young man, thought she, with maternal pride, if he was not struck by one or other of those sweet girls, Hettie, Bettie, or Pattie (Matilda) Sheeves.

The guest-chamber had been prepared in

daily expectation of Charlie's coming down, and it was verily a grand apartment, which a royal prince had once occupied during the Henley Regatta—the time of year when Grange House was to be seen in its glory. Every year Mr. Sheeves registered a vow to let his house during Henley week, as some of his neighbours did, but as June approached he always reflected that he might keep up his name socially by gathering a distinguished party of titled visitors under his roof. So Mrs. Sheeves annually resigned herself to see a French *chef* take possession of her kitchen, and to have her table covered with raised pies and salmon *mayonnaise*, gallons of claret cup and magnums of champagne for relays of lunchers, who dropped in all the afternoon.

Those were the days when the lawn at Grange House was ever thronged with muscular young men in flannels, and it was passing strange that Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie had not yet found mates for themselves from among those young gentlemen with bright ribboned straw hats, who ate the pies and slaked their thirst with the French

wines. But so wags the world that the sweetest of girls are often left unnoticed by the most eligible of men. Water parties and moonlight dances on the lawn, with Venetian lanterns in the trees and a Hungarian band hidden away in the plantations, had only led so far to those flirtations which have been described as attentions without intentions.

Grange House, Henley, was a place of more pretensions altogether than the Blews' villa at Taplow; for the Sheeves had just stepped over the border line which divides town from country. Mr. Christopher Sheeves was a magistrate, and had served his year of shrievalty—a memorable year, during which he had superintended the arrangements for hanging a man in Oxford Castle. He subscribed to all the county packs, and, though not a hunting man himself, sometimes figured at meets in a pink coat, whereof the skirts were of a mashed strawberry tint, which testified to long service, if not to long runs. He punctually took his seat on the bench at petty sessions and quarter sessions, and was one of the possible candidates of his party,

not for the county, but for one of the urban divisions therein. He might, indeed, have enjoyed, at any time, the honour of contesting one of the safe seats held by the other side.

Grange House stood within a few well-wooded acres of its own, at about a mile from the river. It was a new place, built in good imitation of the Tudor style, with a jutting porch, gables, mullioned windows, and tall thin chimneys. It was of red brick, with white stone facings, bricks and stones being still fresh in colour, and likely to remain so long in the smokeless air of the country. The garden was famed for its roses, of which there were some forty varieties, requiring the constant care of an educated gardener, who snarled if a single flower were plucked without his leave ; and adjoining the garden was a glorious poultry yard full of cocks and hens, which had won prizes in the county poultry shows.

From the lumbering Cochin China, with fat feathered legs, to the piping bantam, every sort crowed, strutted, pecked, and kicked up the dust there, and the noise they made at odd hours of the day and night was

deafening. But this collection was Mrs. Sheeves's pride, and she devoted more time to it than she could spare for her nursery. There were fowls in that yard whose ailments she would have trusted for curing to no soul alive, whereas she freely abandoned the whole care of her younger children to their German governess, Fräulein Spitzstock, a kind-hearted, bony person of middle age, who carved with her elbows squared up to her ears, and conveyed meat to her mouth on the point of her knife.

Inside the house there were one or two rooms remarkable for their Chinese furniture. Mr. Sheeves's connection with the tea trade had enabled him to procure a quantity of fine things from China, at a time when these things were less common in the market than they are now ; and there was a certain drawing-room of his which had won universal admiration. It pleased Mrs. Sheeves more to hear this room talked about than to possess it ; but so it was with most other goods appertaining to the Sheeves family, whose daily unconscious business had become that of self-advertisement.

One says "unconscious" because it was now a habit with the family to beat the gong. Mr. Sheeves had long ago established a reputation as an art connoisseur; but every year he bought pictures at the Academy's exhibition in order that his name might figure as a purchaser in the catalogue. Visitors to the Zoological Gardens had from time out of mind been aware that sundry Chinese dogs and rats (of the soup-ingredient species) were presented by Christopher Sheeves, Esq., but his tea-ships were continually bringing him fresh dogs and rats to fill up the vacancies caused by demises in the Regent's Park.

When Mr. Sheeves made a feast unto his friends, which was pretty often, be sure he had something to say about a particular new brand of wine, or about some novel cigar, longer, thicker, or shorter than other men's cigars, but always more expensive. As for Mrs. Sheeves, we must not blame her if her ambition straggled away from those petty concerns which are generally supposed to engross a mother of eleven children. The bill-sticker may be a family man who would

desire nothing better than to spend his time with his offspring, but he has his paste-pot and posters to attend to, and so Mrs. Sheeves seemed to be for ever intent on placarding posters upon the hoardings of society. Poultry show, rose show, dinner-table decoration show—the exuberant lady's heart was in these things; even in her manner of parading her three elder daughters there was something that reminded you of a beauty show.

They were three pretty girls, very fond of their mother, as their mother was of them. They had dark eyes, brown hair, and glib tongues; they were not shy, and they dressed to a fault. One painted, the other sang, and the third played. Every visitor to the Grange was called upon to praise Hettie's water-colour landscapes, to hear Bettie sing the ballad in fashion, and to sit looking appreciative while Pattie performed a nocturne of Chopin's. They acted quite fairly in not trespassing on one another's preserves, so that nobody was ever given to suspect that Hettie could warble a ditty, or that Bettie could paint a cow grazing among buttercups. They had had an identical

education, beginning under an English governess, following up with a German, and finishing with a year in Paris. They had visited the same places with their parents in autumn trips over the Continent, and remembered at least the hotels, if not the monuments, on the Rhine, in Switzerland, and in the five great cities of Italy. There was a years' space between their ages, the eldest being twenty-two, and the third nineteen. They had all three been in love several times, but with diminishing force at each attack, and were now pretty well inoculated against any virulent contagion of the malady. Yet they were not a bit hardened or soured, and they enjoyed life exceedingly. Each had a horse, a dog, a hutch of pet poultry, and a handsome allowance. What is more, the three were fast friends, and backed up one another trustily in every game, whether it was lawn-tennis or flirting.

Mr. Christopher Sheeves's style of living propagated the notion that he was extremely rich, and here, perhaps, we touch the reason why his three daughters remained single. It is most gratifying to have a father-in-law

whose name shines over the dog-kennels and rat-cages of the Zoological Gardens; but when young men came to inquire what portions this munificent patron of art and natural history intended giving to Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie, the answer was "O." Mr. Sheeves lived up to every guinea of his income. He made no debts, but he saved nothing. His policy had consisted in raising up influential friends for his family, and he had, in truth, collected three or four score of such, who, if he had suddenly died without means, might possibly have subscribed a hundred pounds between them for his widow.

The vision of such a catastrophe had never troubled the three sisters; for, having never been in straits for money, they were the least mercenary girls in the world. Yet at this period they were beginning to feel astonished at their continuing single-blessedness, and their eyes were first opened to a glimpse of the truth by their mother's open manoeuvres for bringing her sons Bob and Julian under the notice of Lucy Harrowell. What attractions any young men could per-

ceive in Lucy beyond her money, the Misses Sheeves were at pains to imagine ; but it was a fact that Bob and Julian were laying siege to Lucy with much more determination than Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie had ever beheld in their own lovers.

“ I say, mamma, I don't think Bob is making much running with Lucy,” observed Hettie, one morning just after breakfast.

“ Nor is Julian,” chimed in Bettie.

The three girls, in sailor hats and jackets, lounging about the garden bench on which their mother sat, formed a pretty group. Mrs. Sheeves was a little, meagre, figureless woman, with round, puzzled eyes and a mass of grey-gold hair, always covered by a lace cap with smart ribbons. This cap was her one badge of office as mistress of the house, and prevented her from being mistaken by chance callers for the cook, which might well have happened, considering that her dress was generally concealed under a brown holland apron, which she sported for her ministrations in the poultry yard. At this moment she was drawing on a pair of well-worn gauntlets, and held a surgical instrument for the intro-

duction of pills down the throats of reluctant fowls.

"Lucy is a dear girl," remarked Mrs. Sheeves; "but she doesn't know much of the world. You children ought to take her in hand, and crimp up her ideas a little."

"I should like to crimp her hair first," laughed Pattie. "Did you ever see such plaits as she wears? There isn't such a thing as a pair of irons on her table."

"She doesn't care a rap about the world," added Hettie.

"She's a trifle cracked," affirmed Bettie. "I suppose it runs in the family. Her father ——"

"Hush, Bettie! You must never let me hear you say such a thing as that again," exclaimed Mrs. Sheeves, looking around her frightened.

"Well, mamma; but what are you to think of a London girl with money who has never been to Rotten Row, or the opera, or to a ball, and who doesn't even understand what a *cotillon* is? She only knew it was the French for petticoat."

"I believe Lucy will turn quakeress, and leave all her money to a hospital."

"That would be a pity, indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Sheeves. "There are hospitals enough in all conscience, judging by the number of them your father subscribes to."

"I expect the number of those hospitals encourage poor people to sham being ill," broke in Bettie, mirthfully. "It's like the jelly and white of chicken we got when we were little girls. Whenever the doctor ordered that for one of the others, I was sure to feel that I had got a headache."

Ann and Lucy had gone upstairs to fetch their black garden-hats, and now Lucy appeared on the scene with Bob and Julian, both armed for the fray—that is, prepared to escort her on a country walk. Bob wore a glass in his left eye, and on the bridge of Julian's nose gleamed a *pince-nez*. Bob had a jolly face, with a pair of nautical whiskers; Julian a slight blond moustache, waxed at the tips. Bob's style of conversation was facetious; while Lieutenant Julian was a serious young man—a scientific officer, who

dreamed of assimilating the British army to the German.

Now, it must not be supposed that these two brothers were rivals in the courtship of Lucy. It was tacitly understood between them that, whenever she showed a preference for the one, the other was to leave the course clear. But as yet she had evinced no such preference.

"See, Miss Lucy, you were asking me yesterday to whom that pretty house yonder belonged," exclaimed Bob, as they passed out of the park gates. "I hear they are new people, just come from London—fortune made in currants—fervent Christians in the matter of hot-cross buns, I dare say."

"There seems to be nothing but pretty houses about here," observed Lucy. "Have you no poor?"

"Oh yes, we occasionally catch hold of a tramp and give him a month."

"A month? What for?"

"I mean a month on the treadmill. Why, most of the scarecrows who come about here cadging are simply fellows who have an eye to the overcoats in the front hall."

"It is my opinion that many of those men have never had a fair chance in life," remarked Julian, gravely. "Now, if we had compulsory military service in England, all the adult male population would get a three-years' training in habits of order and obedience, and they would be ashamed to become tramps."

"There is something in that," rejoined Lucy, feeling interested.

"I have often thought that our social system does not deal fairly by the poor," continued Julian, flattered at making an impression. "Many of them are fearfully brought up; well, the State, by taking them for the army, would rectify the defects of their early education, teach them to be clean, respectful, and self-respecting, and, what is more, give them two or three years' proper feeding, which would restore their bodies."

"No doubt some of those London roughs would fight like bull-dogs if clapped into red coats," agreed Bob.

"Ay but even without the fighting," proceeded Julian. "What I complain of is that some of our roughs have never had a

chance of becoming anything better than what they are."

"That is also my experience," said Lucy, quietly.

"Have you much experience of that class, then?" inquired Bob, amused.

"I have seen some very sad things amongst our London poor."

"Ah! you've been slumming, then?"

"What is slumming?"

"Why, going to visit the paupers—the very worst sort, you know—in their own homes,—ten people in a room: that sort of thing."

"Yes, I have been to homes like that," said Lucy, simply; "and I have seen things that would make your blood curdle to hear of."

"Oh, but do tell me some of them. I like to feel my blood curdle," responded Bob.

Bob Sheeves was not going the right way to earn Lucy Harrowell's regard. When Lucy ventured to relate some of the things she had witnessed, he pulled a wry face, and exclaimed—

"A joke's a joke! Of course I wasn't

thinking of such things as these. Dash it ! are there really cases so bad as you describe ? ”

“ A home in which every inmate has been ruined, body and soul, by drink ; where the children have been crippled by the kicks of a drunken father ; where the mother drinks in order that she may have the courage to fight with her husband for the few shillings which he has brought away from the public-house ; this is no uncommon case at all,” pursued Lucy.

“ Confound it ! such things ought not to be allowed,” cried Bob. “ If I were the Government, I would bring in a Bill to put a stop to the whole thing.”

Honest Bob ! you are not the only man who would bring in a Bill for setting all things right, and solace yourself by this good intention for your lack of active interest in the work to be done. The serious Julian remarked, with more tact, if not with truer feeling —

“ When one compares the lot of the wealthy with the utter degradation and benightedness of some among the very poor, it is enough to make one shudder ! ”

“ But why should they be so benighted ? ” objected Bob. “ There are plenty of churches, chapels, and schools, and workhouses, too, for that matter. What are all the parsons, schoolmasters, and relieving-officers about ? ”

“ What would England be if these men did less than they are doing ? I think that is the right way to put the question,” replied Lucy. “ All these churches, chapels, and schools seem to me like springs of pure water discharging their streams into a polluted river. They do not purify it, but they prevent it from being the unendurable, pestilential thing which it would otherwise be. Yet so much more requires to be done. The largest fortune which could be given by the richest person on earth would not do more than check a very little of the evil that is daily growing. It dismays one to think, that, having done one’s best with a life’s labour, and every shilling one could spend, the results would yet appear so small.”

From which little speech, hearkened to in silence, the brothers Sheeves concluded that Lucy Harrowell’s mind did not incline towards matrimony, but towards “ fads,” tire-

some in a man, and hardly tolerable in a young lady. They continued their walk, however, and, being amiable, gentlemanlike fellows, they both endeavoured to provide entertainment by disclosing the beauties of their respective minds and characters. Having done which, they brought their fair charge home to lunch, feeling they had performed their duty, though not perhaps entirely satisfied with their morning's walk.

Their sisters had been spending a much more recreative forenoon with Ann Harrowell, whom they already liked. Ann's intelligence did not feed upon "fads," and her character had no nooks. In her were plainness of speech, directness of purpose, and warmth of heart, without proneness to judge morosely of men and things. Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie thought her "countrified," which was the only term they could find to define the London girl's inexperience of those aspects of London life which were familiar to them; but this was a venial fault, considering how pleased Ann was to derive from them whatever instruction they chose to impart.

But, then, Ann Harrowell was engaged to be married! About that fact there was no mistake. Happy in her love, proud of it, she was glad to proclaim to all the world that she was going to be married to the man of her choice. Why should she have concealed that which she deemed so great an honour to her? She had given her heart and whole devotion to Hugh Armstrong, and his name must be for ever on her lips, whilst all her thoughts were centred on the life she was going to lead by his side. Every day she wrote to him, and every morning's post brought a letter from him to her. The Sheeves family had to put up with this. It was a pity for Bob and Julian that Hugh Armstrong had not fallen in love with Lucy rather than with Ann; but things must be taken as they are, and so the Sheeves family took them.

"There she goes! I suppose to bring Mr. Armstrong home," exclaimed Hettie, later in the day, as Ann set off for the railway station to meet an afternoon train from London. For another Saturday had come round, and this time Hugh Armstrong

had been invited to take up his quarters at Grange House.

"Armstrong is a precious lucky fellow," remarked Bob. "He can't be making much out of newspaper work, and he'll just step into ten thousand a year on his wedding-day."

"Well, Bob, faint heart never won fair lady," answered Bettie. "You have a whole year before you. Why don't you try to cut him out?"

"If I told you I didn't care to try, you'd say the grapes were sour," replied Bob, savagely. "But, to tell you the truth, I don't believe in drawing people into love through long scheming. It's too much like spreading the snare in sight of the fowler."

"In sight of the bird, you mean."

"Yes, in sight of the bird. I believe you just tumble into love as you slip off a plank into the water—head over ears at one go."

"Well, I never!" chorused the three sisters, though they did not inwardly dispute the truth of the simile. And, as it happened, they had no time for a further disquisition on love, for, at this juncture, Mrs. Sheeves

appeared on the lawn, fluttering a piece of pink paper.

“My dears, your father has telegraphed that he is bringing down Charlie Harrowell with him, to stay till Monday. I have sent the waggonette down to the station to meet them.”

In the twinkling of an eye, the clothes which Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie wore and the dressing of their hair became mean in their sight, and they fled indoors to make suitable changes in their adornments.

“Provided they don’t all three slip off the plank together,” soliloquized Bob, with a grin.





CHAPTER VIII.

UNAWARE of the telegram which Mrs. Sheeves had received, Ann Harrowell wended her way towards the railway station. A clear September sun was beaming over the stubble-fields and hedgerows ; the swallows were not yet gone, and the air was mild with an autumn warmth. At this season, when the summer is gone and every fine day is felt to be so much gained on the period of cold and rains which is due, the mind, ever moving onwards, muses on the coming winter. It is the afternoon of the year, and the long evening, with its fireside cares, is at hand.

Yet Ann's pulses beat hopefully. The edge of her sorrow for her father's death was getting dulled, and, when she could turn her reflections from the past to the future, she

tasted one of the most delightful joys that can be given to a girl—that of feeling that she could lay a large fortune at the feet of a man who had asked her hand before he knew there was anything in it.

For Hugh, when he went out to Egypt as a war correspondent, had known nothing as to Mr. Harrowell's means. He loved Ann for herself, and the first intimation that reached him concerning the alderman's fortune, came to him rather as a disagreeable surprise, because it raised obstacles in the path of his love. It did this, moreover, that it knocked away his strongest incentives to earning and laying by, and upset all the plans he had made for his wedded life. His simple-minded calculations as to how far his savings would go towards furnishing a house were wiped away like schoolboy sums from a slate; and he was quite at a loss to picture himself controlling a domestic budget in which the totals ran to five and six figures. Doubtless he was happier when he imagined that his wife's dresses would be paid for out of his newspaper articles. For men who, like Hugh Armstrong, have the health, the talent,

and the heart to work, do not resign themselves gaily to the idea that their wives will be dependent on them for nothing, and that the labours for which they feel themselves best fitted will have to be desisted from as useless.

If only Ann could get Hugh to accept some of her money at once, so that he might be eased from his daily—or to speak more correctly—his nightly toil ! But of course he had laughed at the notion when it was hinted. Five times a week he went up to the *Express* office at ten o'clock in the evening, and there wrote till the small hours on any subject his editor proposed. He was the best all-round man in his office, and no topic came amiss to him. His proofs corrected, he walked home to his lodgings in Bloomsbury, eschewing cabs as too dear. The prospect of his coming wealth had not altered, and was not going to alter, his habits in any wise. He still smoked a pipe, as being cheaper than cigars ; his dinner was a grill and a tankard of beer ; and if he travelled alone he went by third class.

“ I am still enjoying the luxury of feeling

I can't afford things," he said, when Ann had once softly reproached him for not sparing himself a little more. "Believe me, it is one of the greatest pleasures of existence to wish for things out of your reach: that's why I think a dog who has to jump for a bone a luckier fellow than one who gets his set before him on a plate. Now, when you take to driving me about in your carriage like a valetudinarian, and give me everything I can fancy, I shall have nothing to wish for."

"I'd wish my money at the bottom of the sea, if I thought it was not going to add to your happiness, Hugh dear," was Ann's half-smiling, half-serious answer.

"If your money were at the bottom of the sea, my Annie, our joint energies would be expended in fishing it up again," he laughed. "We might get some fun out of voyages down into the deep in a diving-bell, or you might stand on shore and pump air to me down a pipe, whilst I groped about under water in a diver's suit. But perhaps we had better be content with imagining these delights, and resolve to be happy with your money unwatered."

"So then, you'll be a good dear Hugh, won't you, and think how we shall live when we are married? Mr. and Mrs. Sheeves have both told me that you ought to advise me on that point."

"I am so well qualified to lecture on it!" he replied, with a droll look. "To be sure, I might take counsel of men who have ten thousand a year; but the worst of it is, that all men in that condition whom I have ever met have thought themselves poor."

These sayings reverted to Ann's mind as she walked along past the pretty villas and gardens that adorn the outskirts of Henley. All the beauties, comforts, and elegancies of English home-life gladdened her eyes as they viewed these places. Gems of domestic architecture, porches overgrown with purple wistaria, scented flower-beds, glimpses through open white-curtained windows into drawing-rooms furnished with every refinement of taste, and then the signs of peaceful and prosperous living which everywhere abounded in the rosy faces of children and of servant-girls, in white caps and aprons, who laughed as they took in milk by the

gallon and armfuls of brown crusted cottage loaves from dairymen and bakers at the garden gates.

It was a curious sensation to come over the London girl (who had never had more than a few pounds of her own), that it was within her means to buy any one of these earthly paradises, and that indeed the most luxurious of them would cost but a trifle in regard to her power of purchasing. It was like the feeling that strikes a grown-up person in a toy shop, when the remembrance recurs of the last visit paid many years before, when all the playthings seemed so enviable and so dear. In what sort of a house would it please Hugh Armstrong to dwell? Would he desire an old mansion guarded by long avenues of secular trees, with colonies of cawing rooks, or would he be for creating some palace home, all new, according to his artist fancy? Would he wish to buy or build? Would he be content to live in England, or would he propose to his bride that they should settle in one of those sunny foreign lands, which he had visited, where the sky was of a turquoise blue by day and

of a sapphire blue by night, and where the orange could be plucked from the roadside trees ?

Ann resolved that she must be very business-like, and have all this out with Master Hugh during the next few days' intercourse ; and over this purpose there hovered another, which was that her lord and master must become the owner of her future fortune whatever might befall her. She was of age to make a will, and was maturing a little plan for bequeathing all that she possessed to her dearly beloved Hugh—such testament to be fairly written out in her own hand, witnessed and deposited in the office of some respectable lawyer, who would keep it secret and locked up in a tin box till it was wanted.

Girls make their wills by way of pastime, whether they have anything to bequeath or not. It is a common amusement enough, and Ann could have had no serious ideas about predecease when she projected her first and natural exercise of the rights of proprietorship, yet her plan was an earnest one, and it struck a vein of grave thoughts.

One blow from the spade may open the way to a coal-mine.

First arose the recollection of her father's miserable death. If her father was insane, asked the startled girl of herself, could it be that he had transmitted any taint of his awful malady to his children? Might it be that she, her sister, and her brother were liable to fall into a melancholy which, by rapid unseen inroads upon the reason, would bring them to some sudden act of despair? It was an appalling fancy this, of lurking madness ready to spring, and Ann Harrowell had to pause at a road corner with her hand on a gate-post, for her head swam and she was panting.

A few minutes passed before she could dismiss her hallucinations as morbid. Her helplessness and confidence in God's mercy gave her the only comfort possible, but she was still pale and wretched when she walked into the railway station, and she longed to be leaning on Hugh's strong arm, with the sense that *his* loving protection, too, was over her.

The London train arrived. Hugh descended from it, followed by Mr. Sheeves,

whom Ann had expected to see, but behind him came Charlie, whom Ann had not expected.

"Why, Charlie, what a surprise!" she exclaimed, greeting her brother, though not till Hugh had taken her into his arms and kissed her.

"Ay, you may well say it," laughed Mr. Sheeves. "Would you believe that our young friend thought of taking himself off to the Continent, without so much as bidding one goodbye amongst us all. I had actually to collar him."

"No, Charlie, you were not going to do that?" inquired Ann, uneasy at her brother's feeble and careworn appearance.

"Mr. Sheeves is only joking," said Charlie, with a smile. "Of course I should have come down to see you."

"And how are you, dear? We heard you had only got a cold, but you seem to have been ill."

"Oh, I am all right, Annie." But his looks did not quite confirm his words; and Mr. Sheeves treated him like an invalid, supporting him under the arm as they crossed

the platform, and not suffering him to carry so much as an overcoat.

"Here is the waggonette that will take you and me to the Grange, Harrowell. As for you two young people, I dare say you will prefer walking."

Ann and Hugh—"the two young people"—*did* prefer walking, and when they had watched the carriage with its pair of spanking bays (the "best-matched pair in the county") dash away from the station, they followed afoot through the town, minded to take the longest route to the Grange, along the towing-path of the river, and thence over a circuit of endless fields.

"It won't be quite polite to Mrs. Sheeves," Hugh remarked, with a wag of the head, "but then I've so much to say to you, Annie."

"And I to you, Hugh dear."

These two might also have been called the best-matched pair in the county. Both were tall, with fine straightforward eyes and good thoughtful faces: she, beautiful with all the graces of maidenhood; he, manly in his experience of the world, and his quiet assurance as a teacher of his fellow-men. For in his

anonymous newspaper columns Hugh Armstrong was a public instructor to a greater degree than the preacher in his pulpit or the lecturer in his professional chair; and no journalist discharged his duties with a more conscientious regard to the power which he wielded.

"You have not been working too hard, Hugh?" asked Ann, as they emerged from the town and strolled countrywards along the river's side.

"The same round, Annie,—grinding out my five columns of words,—but I really forget on what subjects."

"Oh, I remember them! Just as if I couldn't distinguish your articles at a glance from the others! They stand out like strips of scarlet upon grey cloth."

"That's like telling me that I'm blaring on a trumpet in a quartett of violins; or that I'm pulling my oar in the boat grandly independent of the stroke."

"In every boat, though, there must be one oarsman who rows better than the others," answered Ann, naïvely.

She saw that he was affecting to be

blithesome, but that something lay on his mind.

"You have had no worries of any kind, Hugh dear? Everything has been going well?"

"Oh yes—at least, I have had some worries about Charlie."

"About his health?" she inquired anxiously.

"No, there's nothing wrong with his health; but I have been troubled about other things. I must warn you that he is going to speak to you, Lucy, and me about his proposed marriage. I do not know what he is going to say, but from a hint which he dropped it must be important."

"His marriage with Baroness de la Neva?"

"I presume so. You told me, Annie, that the Baroness had produced a favourable impression on you?"

"I have only met her once, but I certainly did judge her to be a lady, and a nice winning little woman."

"A woman to whom you would have no sort of objection as a sister-in-law?"

"I did not say that, Hugh. It is impossible to judge so far in a single interview.

But then, Charlie is not bound to consult my tastes in the matter."

"No ; of course he must marry as he likes. But I hope the Baroness bears no moral resemblance to her brother ; for, Annie, I quite share your dislike of that man."

"I have never liked Mr. Travers," replied Ann, with decision, "and it gave me quite a shock when I heard that he was staying in our house. I have been afraid to ask in what room he slept. It wasn't in poor papa's room, was it ?"

"I think not ; but he has been quite master of the house during the past fortnight, and Charlie seems to be completely under his thumb."

Ann deplored her brother's infatuation, and gave some reasons of a somewhat feminine character why she abhorred Mr. Travers. The shiftiness of his glance, his excess of politeness, his foppish style of dressing, and his habit of agreeing with everything one said, were the traits that had set her against him at their first meeting. But before that she had formed a bad opinion of him from her knowledge that he was leading Charlie

wrong. Hugh listened in silence, walking with his head bent, and occasionally poking stones with his stick off the bank into the river. But gradually his step slackened till he stopped, and with a tender gaze into Ann's eyes, said—

“Forgive me, love, if I touch upon a most sad subject ; but tell me whether you ever noticed anything in your poor father's conduct to make you suspect that he was going out of his mind ?”

“Nothing—never,” replied Ann, with the more vehemence, as she had so lately been debating this matter with herself. “Papa was a little harder and more wayward in his temper of late than he had been before ; but, beyond all doubt, his mind seemed clear.”

“I ask because the motives of your father's suicide appear to me so inadequate,” continued Hugh. “That little mutiny of yours about *our* affair (here he pressed her arm) and Charlie's not very heinous escapades may have been enough to anger a man accustomed to rule despotically over his own household ; but from anger to desperation is a great step.”

"Papa was deeply attached to his home," said Ann, reflecting sorrowfully, "and if he had made up his mind to buy an estate for our sakes, he must have intended to leave the old home. We have thought that at the last moment he may have felt unable to endure this prospect."

"Certainly motives weaker than that have driven men out of life," said Hugh, "but your father always struck me as an exceptionally strong-willed man, and he was sincerely religious. Answer me now another question, Annie. Have you ever mentally associated Travers in any way with what happened?"

"Mr. Travers? Why, Hugh, how could I have done such a thing?"

"Your father knew nothing about Charlie's resolve to marry Travers's sister?"

"No, Charlie was going to tell him, and I was dreadfully apprehensive about the scene that might take place."

"But why should there have been a scene?"

"I cannot exactly say why," replied Ann, in distress. "But things were not going on well at home. Papa thought us disobedient,

and I was afraid Charlie might show himself too plainly determined about his marriage, whether papa approved it or not. That would have been sure to have caused a scene. And then, Hugh, papa had not been altogether reasonable about my engagement with you."

"Well, I witnessed rather a remarkable scene the other day," Hugh proceeded, with a puzzled air. "And as I was watching Travers's face intently all the time, a suspicion rose in me that he knew more about your father's suicide than any of us. I wondered whether he had not had an interview with Mr. Harrowell after you had all gone to Taplow ; whether he had not spoken of your brother's attachment, and in some way provoked your poor father to that frantic state of mind that caused the catastrophe?"

Hugh then related what he had seen and heard : the visit of the police-sergeant, bringing back Charlie's lost latch-key ; the recovery of the missing bag, and the circumstance of Mr. Harrowell's having cashed a cheque for £500 on the day before his death.

"But I come now to the most surprising

thing of all," concluded Hugh, whose face had become graver and graver as he proceeded.

"Oh, what is it, Hugh? do tell me quickly," implored Ann, all in trepidation, as she saw him pause.

"I have told you that I took down the numbers of the notes paid to your father," he said. "After two days' reflection I thought I would make inquiries at the Bank of England. Of course I could not stop the notes, but I laid all the facts truthfully before the cashier, and he informed me at once that several of the notes, including one for a hundred pounds, had already been paid in from Paris. Now, when I first saw Travers at your father's funeral, I could have sworn that I had crossed over from Paris with him a few days previously. I told him this, but he assured me I was mistaken."

"Oh, Hugh, what mystery is there in all this?" exclaimed Ann, horror-struck. "Have you warned Charlie?"

"I have not thought it expedient to speak to Charlie yet," said Hugh. "Travers denies that he was in Paris, and he may be telling the truth; if so, there is no connection

between him and the bank-notes. Of course the matter would wear a very different complexion if it could be proved that Travers was in Paris; in that case we should have to push our investigations much further."

"But you are not going to rest content with Mr. Travers's word, are you?"

"No. I shall continue my inquiries, but it must be managed very quietly, and I must do nothing that would put Travers on his guard. I fear he already suspects that I have my doubts about him."

Ann burned to discuss further the amazing things which Hugh had said, but he would not let himself be drawn towards conjectures or random conclusions. From professional habit he was quick to grasp facts and draw inferences from them, but he never mistook appearances for facts, and injustice was a thing which he loathed from his soul.

"We must remember that Charlie is very fond of Travers, and that Mr. Sheeves has a good opinion of him," he said, as they were nearing the Grange, after their long walk. "Undeniably Travers is an able man, and we might be doing him a deep wrong by

suspecting his character. I have heard that he edits a financial paper of no good repute, but the reputation of a newspaper is often a matter of opinion. What you and I have got to recollect, Annie, is that, if Charlie marries Travers's sister, Travers will become one of the family, and his honour will be to some extent our honour. We must, therefore, beware of defaming him, and we ought not so to act that he should be turned into an enemy and breed estrangement between your brother and us."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Ann. "If Charlie marries, I shall want to be his wife's dear friend."

"Exactly," replied Hugh. "Anything, within reason and honour, to avoid family quarrels."





CHAPTER IX.

CHARLIE HARROWELL had come to Henley simply that he might inform his sisters of his approaching marriage; and, as we know, he took no pleasure in the visit.

"I know Ann will support me in this," he repeated to himself in the train; but he felt less than half sure, and it would be absurd to suppose that he was not nervous at the news which he had to break. It is in woman's nature, but not in man's, to feel a keen joy in self-sacrifice. When a woman says that she loves a man the more for hearing of something that degrades him in the eyes of the world, she means what she says; for he is more wholly her own whom others have contemned, and she knows that there is devotion enough in her to com-

pensate for all the world's coldness. There are no shoals in woman's love. You may sound it at any spot and find it unfathomable.

But a man! Daring as a man may be in his championship of the woman whom he loves, his defence of her is a duty which brings no delight. It is a grim thing that has to be done with set lips, but with inward regret that the thing should be necessary at all, and with a despairing consciousness that the doughtiest defence will not ward off all blows from the woman to be vindicated. The whiter the flag the more must it be soiled in the heat of the fray. No man ever fought for a woman's character without having to feel that it had suffered somewhat from his ardour in protecting it.

Charlie feared Lucy more than Ann, and Hugh Armstrong more than either. He deliberated as to whether he ought not to speak first to Ann, win her over to his side, and then inform the others. Or would it not be wiser in the first instance to consult Hugh Armstrong's advice alone? The objection to this course was that Hugh

Armstrong's advice could be predicted to a dead certainty, and once the advice given, Hugh would have to stand by it, whatever the girls might say—if, indeed, Ann would say anything against her lover's judgment.

There was this general objection, too, to the single-consultation system, that it would entail the fighting of two or three battles instead of one. One fight and get the whole thing over, was the plan towards which Charlie inclined.

Of course the victory must remain with him in the end; but there is victory and victory. In plain language, what Charlie wanted was to convince his sisters and his future brother-in-law that he would be acting righteously, properly, and sensibly in marrying Mabel; and, when he had succeeded in this, he should want them to strengthen his own persuasion that his conduct was righteous, proper, and sensible. The triumph of victory is not complete until the vanquished have been brought to acknowledge that the victor's cause was a right one. Merely to silence his sisters, and to wring a grudging sanction from them—merely to subdue them,

leaving soreness, and perhaps enmity, in their hearts—was not all what Charlie aspired to.

“I must choose my time and appeal chiefly to Ann, who is in love herself,” he repeated, as a final conclusion. And it rejoiced him to see, when he arrived at the Grange and found himself amidst a bevy of fair girls and affectionate friends, that he was not likely to be thrown into *tête-à-tête* with his sisters until he desired it.

Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie Sheeves encompassed him like attendant nymphs. How tired he must be of his journey! Would he like to go upstairs and wash his hands, or go at once and sit under a tree in the garden? Would he take some tea or some soda-water?

“My dear Charlie, I am so delighted to see you,” exclaimed good Mrs. Sheeves. “Why, last time we met, you were a boy in jackets!”

“And hasn’t he grown into a fine, strapping fellow?” cried Mr. Sheeves, with parental patronage. “Now, Charlie, my boy, you must look upon this house as your home; and, as you’re on the sick-list, you’re entitled to the best chair.”

"And you must take a perfect rest here, and dismiss all worries from your mind," chimed in Mrs. Sheeves.

"The first prescription to that end being a sherry-cobbler," affirmed Mr. Sheeves, who had adorned himself with a pith helmet and boating jacket, and was quite in a festive mood. "Hettie, you're the girl to mix the cobbler; you always give your elbow the proper jerk when handling the curaçoa."

"Oh, Papa, how can you!" laughed Hettie, running indoors, but pleased perhaps to have scored a good mark for one of the domestic virtues.

"And, Bettie, you're the connoisseur in cigars," proceeded Mr. Sheeves, more and more hilarious. "You know my favourite box. What, Charlie! you don't smoke? Why, I thought all young men contributed aroma to the atmosphere in these times!"

"Perhaps Mr. Harrowell prefers his own pipe, like Mr. Armstrong," suggested Pattie, who had mocking eyes.

Which caused Charlie to say, "No, thank you, *Miss* Pattie;" but this with such an

emphasis on the *miss* that they were all made merry.

"It used to be 'Charlie' and 'Pattie' when you last met," remarked Mr. Sheeves, clipping the point off his cigar.

"I dare say I remember that meeting better than Pattie does," remarked Charlie, intent on making himself agreeable.

"No, indeed!" protested that young lady. "We met at the Soho Bazaar at about Christmas time, many years ago, and you were so gallant in escorting me about that the stall-girls took us for brother and sister."

"I wish they had been right. A boy can't have too many nice sisters."

"I say, Lucy, that is a compliment to you," exclaimed Pattie. "Now, our brothers, Bob and Ju, have never in the whole course of their lives made us such a speech as that."

"But Bob and Ju have been more plentifully endowed than Charlie," observed Mrs. Sheeves, amused.

"Quantity does not always make up for quality, though," grinned Bob. And as this was felt to be a delicate homage to Lucy,

who sat taciturn, the remark was allowed to pass.

But it was too early in the afternoon for the whole preprandial period to be spent on the lawn, so when the sherry-cobblers had been discussed, and when the company had waited sufficiently long for Ann and Hugh, who did not turn up, an adjournment was proposed to the river. This sent the girls hurrying upstairs again, to put on the sailor hats and jackets which they had discarded an hour before, and presently the whole party, excepting Mrs. Sheeves, were straying across fields. Mr. Sheeves, with his long legs and jolly nose led the way at a slow step, insisting that Charlie should lean on his arm ; but Charlie demurred, and the girls made so bold as to chaff him a little for his reluctance to be treated as an invalid. Good-humouredly he joined in the laugh against himself, but attempted little in the way of repartees.

It makes all the difference in the tone of a country visit what key-note is struck in the first half-hour. If Charlie had shown himself silent, taciturnity and depression would

have prevailed all round, and it might have been impossible to attune the inmates of the Grange to anything livelier for a day or two. But that little joke about Pattie had worked the spirits of the three light-hearted sisters to a high pitch, and there they remained set for the rest of the afternoon. Charlie had not been among them an hour, and they appeared to stand on no more ceremony with him than if he were really their brother.

"Now, we won't have a launch, but a good family four-oar tub," cried Mr. Sheeves, lifting his helmet to mop his head. "I'll take my turn at rowing."

"I know what that means, papa," said Hettie, the eldest and tallest of the sisters; "your turn for pulling an oar always comes just as we are landing. Never mind; Bettie and I will row, and Pattie shall steer."

Hettie took the stroke oar, Bettie the bow, Bob and Julian the two others, while Mr. Sheeves lay on a rug in the bows, and Pattie steered, seated between Charlie and Lucy. Very gracefully the girls did their work, bending forward with straight backs, pulling their oars clean through the water,

and feathering with hands well down. Charlie found, however, that his post was to be no sinecure, for Hettie's stretcher had to be readjusted, and, when the sisters changed places, Pattie going to the bow, and Bettie coming to be coxswain, Charlie had to stand up and lend a helping hand, while the boat lurched so that he once lost his balance and nearly fell overboard—whereat Hettie almost dropped her oar for laughing.

Then they met with the misadventures which are customary to tubs. They were chased by an angry swan whom Pattie had splashed; they had a narrow escape of seeing both their stroke-side oars shaved off at the rowlocks by an erratic launch; next, the rudder-lines, having somehow got crossed—through Charlie's fault, as it was subsequently proved—Bettie drove the nose of the boat right into a bank. This occasioned more peals of laughter, which became uncontrollable when a water rat, who was darting into a hole of the bank, missed his footing, tumbled into the bows, and scampered deliriously over Mr. Sheeves's face.

Charlie enjoyed all this so much that he

marvelled at himself. It was not as though he had been obliged to contribute actively to the fun; he contributed nothing but a sociable presence. The girls and their brother Bob kept up the frolic and jesting between them, and Charlie, except when he was rendering the little services that gallantry demanded, had nothing to do but to sit at ease, feeling wonderfully refreshed by the abrupt change from the anxieties which had worried him all the morning. If, however, he had taken his full part in the fun, he could not have more strongly impressed his amiability on the girls than he did by simply allowing himself to be amused.

“I think he is a very nice fellow indeed!” proclaimed Hettie, when she and her sisters went up to their rooms to dress for dinner. It bewilders one to think how many times young ladies like this dress in a day.

“It is very nice to see a young man so sincerely affected by his father's death as he seems to be,” remarked Bettie, who was the most sentimental of the three—she who painted in water-colours.

“What strikes me about him, is his good

society manner," declared Pattie. "He isn't a bit shy. I hate shy men; they do such rude things."

"Yes, he is *très comme il faut*," concurred Hettie. "Judging by his sisters, I expected he would belong to the inexperienced and simpering, or to the inexperienced and self-asserting order of young men,—both equally objectionable."

"You would never take him to be so rich as he is; he hasn't even brought a valet," was Bettie's next comment.

"And there's another thing I noticed about him," said Pattie: "he didn't affect to put himself on an equality with papa in talking in stage asides about city business. Don't you abominate the young man who seizes at every opportunity for whispering about closing prices?"

The man who is not of the world, if well dressed, is only to be distinguished from the other when he opens his mouth. So long as he confines himself to listening with polite attention to his hostess's remarks, and returns natural answers in as few words as possible, but with a pleasant manner, he does that

which the mundane think it an art to have learned to do. Even Ann and Hugh Armstrong were a little struck by Charlie's dignified bearing at dinner. Theirs were the only grave faces at the table. Lucy herself was not always proof against Bob Sheeves's sallies. Jocularly circled all round the board; and Mr. Sheeves, as he sat patriarchally sipping his wine, and exempt from the cares of carving—for were not even his family dinners served *à la russe*?—kept on crying, with the appearance of every succeeding bottle—

“Now Armstrong, tell me what you think of that wine. Charlie, don't miss that *Mumm*,—you'll have to lay in a stock of it yourself.”

After dinner there was a conference in the drawing-room as to whether the usual round of entertainments should be indulged in, but the hesitation did not last long. Charlie was to be regaled with the accustomed programme. Hettie sang—not badly either—two songs of Molloy's. Bettie produced her sketch-book, and had to explain that a certain horned thing standing nonplussed (as it looked) in a large dish of spinach was a dear cow, long departed this life, who had been her joy when

she was a child; and Pattie, with a good deal of fire in her little fingers, dashed off Liszt's Hungarian rhapsody, while Charlie turned over the leaves of her music-book.

Thereafter Mr. Sheeves must needs take Charlie from room to room to exhibit their ornaments. That famous Chinese drawing-room, the talk of the county, claimed his attention, and with it a series of pictures which, according to the host's manner of introducing them, seemed to have been bought at so much the square inch.

"To-morrow is Sunday, lie-abed day," said Mr. Sheeves, when at last the time of goodnight arrived. "Mind, you'll have no letters to bother you. Tea and toast in bed, and we shan't expect you till we see you."

When Charlie had retired to his room he was pleased with his evening, but felt somewhat as if he were amongst all these glad-some people under false colours. What would they say when they heard of his engagement? Good-natured as they were, would they ever suffer the widow of a condemned murderer to enter their circle?

To put the question was to answer it in the negative.



CHAPTER X.

WHEN Mr. Sheeves stated that there would be no letters to trouble his guest on Sunday, he forgot that there was one morning delivery. This post brought Ann the following letter from Mabel Snow :—

“ DEAR MISS HARROWELL,

“ By the time you receive this, your brother will have told you my true name and who I am. My object in writing this is to pray that you will not let anything which your brother may say about me in his loving-kindness influence the advice which you may feel prompted to give as his sister. Now that you know my history, you can imagine how inestimably precious to me is your brother's love; but I have been wondering whether he quite realizes the extent of the sacrifices which he

is prepared to make for me. It occurred to me, after he left London this morning, that I ought to write this.

“Sincerely yours,

“MABEL SNOW.”

Ann found this letter beside her plate on the breakfast-table, and she read it before sitting down. She and Lucy were alone with Mrs. Sheeves, who stood at the tea-urn. The hot dishes had not yet been brought in, and the family were just beginning to saunter downstairs.

Twice did Ann read the letter, with an astonishment that made her face crimson, and then she handed the letter to Lucy. Just at that moment Charles entered the room. He had not accepted his privilege of lying in bed, but presented himself in a black coat, intending to go to church. Mrs. Sheeves exclaimed at sight of him that there was a marvellous improvement in his appearance since the day before.

“Why, Charlie, you look quite a different man already. Our country air is a grand restorative.”

Her quick eye had noticed that there was something important in Ann's letter, for the two girls sat silence-stricken. They could scarcely eat, but watched their brother with anxious glances, wondering what could be the fatal secret which he held in reserve for them. Mabel Snow was evidently the lady whom they had known as the "Baroness," but what could be that history of her life to which she so darkly alluded? It amazed them to see how coolly Charlie got through his breakfast. He appeared to have no load whatever on his mind.

Immediately after the meal, Ann said that she wished to speak a few words to her brother, and the hint was enough to prevent any of the Sheeves family from accompanying the Harrowells as they all three walked into the garden through the verandah-door-windows. Ann would have liked to bring Hugh Armstrong with her, but she feared that Charlie might be displeased if she did so. They made for a garden-seat, and there Ann produced Mabel's letter.

The colour came to Charlie's face as he read it.

“Well, you have now learned a great deal of what I was going to tell you,” he said at length, after a prefatory cough. “Do you remember Ramshart telling us one day that, whilst at Portland, he had become interested in a convict, who, he was sure, had been wrongly convicted of murder?”

“Yes, I recollect; and you spoke to him very unkindly about it,” said Lucy.

“I was wrong to speak unkindly. That unfortunate man, who is dead now, was Mabel Snow’s husband.”

“But then, Charlie, she was not a widow when you first made love to her!” Ann exclaimed.

“She would never listen to a word of love from me whilst her husband lived,” answered Charlie. “You remember her asking you to warn me that she could never listen, and she said that we must not see each other again? It was after this that I wrote her my first love letter, which remained unanswered; and when I next met her, she was truly a widow. Her husband had been at the point of death for some time.”

“But why did she call herself a baroness?” inquired Lucy.

“Because her husband’s rightful name was Baron de la Neva. Either he or his father turned the name into English when they settled in this country. But as to this, I may tell you both, once and for all, that Mabel has never misled or enticed me in the slightest particular. The love-making has been all on my side; there has been nothing but reserve on hers. You see how she writes in this letter. Poor child! she is thinking only that she may injure me.”

“And you truly love her?” asked Lucy.

“I love her with all my heart, and am ready to proclaim it before the world.”

“Then it is your duty to marry her,” said Lucy, decidedly.

There was always a hardness in Lucy’s judgments, whether she approved or condemned. She saw the right thing to be done, and was for doing it forthwith without shrinking. Ann, more prudent, suggested reflection. When Charlie had uttered a few words more in enthusiastic praise of Mabel’s character and in commiseration with her woes, she said—

“We must deeply pity the poor lady; but, Charlie, her letter is a very sensible one, and

I think you ought to consider that her antecedents might be a great trouble to you in after-life."

"I do not see that at all," interposed Lucy. "Some people might say that *we* all had wretched antecedents, owing to poor papa's death; but, supposing Hugh were to say that in consequence of what has happened, he felt bound to reflect: what would you think of his love?"

"Oh, Lucy!" ejaculated Ann, piteously, for the words struck her hard. Since she had been seized with the horror of possible hereditary insanity, the dread that Hugh might be troubled with the same thoughts had fallen like a drop of poison into the cup of her hopes. After her sister's retort she dared no longer dispute. "You know best, Charlie," she said meekly. "If things are, as you have been told, you must certainly remain faithful to your promise."

"Yes, but you will not turn your faces against Mabel, when she is my wife?"

"How could you think such a thing? . . . Your wife will be our sister, of course."

"We will meet her as she may wish to be

met," added Lucy. "If she makes you happy, Charlie, there can be nothing but affection from us to her."

"Well, you are both good girls," replied Charlie, kissing them. "And, Annie, you will tell Hugh of all this, won't you? I don't think I need discuss the matter with him, though it is only right that he should know."

"Very well, dear; I will tell him, as you desire it."

And that was all. There was no more fighting over the question than that. They all three returned to the house to prepare for church, and Charlie could exult in the knowledge that he had no opposition to fear from his sisters.

But why was he, for the moment, rather dejected than elated? Because, when men have set themselves to do an heroic thing, they do not enjoy being told that they are simply discharging a duty. Ready for a stubborn encounter, Charlie found that there was no call for his valour, and he appeared to himself to have been rather Quixotic. Moreover, the sense of his responsibility weighed upon him much more heavily now that nobody

was going to question his right to act as he pleased.

He almost wished Hugh Armstrong would take high ground, so that the famous fight might come off to his glorification. But Hugh did nothing of the sort. Men are always reserved as to meddling with each other's love affairs, and then Hugh stood in a delicate position. He was a poor man who had proposed to an heiress, and Charlie, far from frowning upon his suit, had behaved extremely well. In the circumstances, it would be almost indecent in him to interfere with Charlie's choice of a wife. If it flashed upon him for an instant that he had some right to offer counsel regarding a lady who aspired to become a relation of his own by marriage—he rejected this delusion as soon as it was formed. He had no rights at all. As he loved Ann Harrowell, he must be prepared to take her with any social disadvantages which might attend her, just as she was ready to take him.

However, what he did say, speaking to Ann (who brought him the strange tidings) was this—

“Mrs. Snow's letter seems to me to be that

of an honest woman ; but when I think of Travers, I cannot feel satisfied that Charlie yet knows the whole truth."

"What are we to do ?" inquired Ann, helplessly.

"We must not let ourselves be misguided by any mere prejudice against Travers, that is certain," answered Hugh Armstrong.

"He appears to have acted honourably in confessing his sister's story to Charlie."

"Yes, and it may be that those characteristics of his on which we based our bad opinion of him, were only signs of the uneasiness which he felt while his confession was yet unmade. Still, I shall not rest until I have discovered how far Travers can be trusted ; I don't want to meddle, but if I saw Charlie being cheated at cards or in danger of being attacked by a garrotter, it would be my duty to step forward."

"Do watch over Charlie, Hugh, dear," implored Ann, with tears in her eyes. "I have a presentiment that he will require your aid. I could not oppose him, but I do not like all this. I have a feeling that all is not right. She would have burst into crying, had they not been walking in a public street, for

she had given him Mabel's letter to read as they came out of church, and they were now on their way to the Grange.

"I will do all I can, Annie. Do not be down-hearted," he answered kindly; "but I must work quietly and, it may be, that nothing will come of it. You know, mysteries are not always unravelled."

"But, meanwhile, am I to tell Charlie that you see no objection to his marriage?"

"I do not think he will expect me to say whether I object or not. He will see by my manner that I have not the presumption to advise him."

"Oh, don't call it presumption, Hugh; in experience and sagacity Charlie is a mere boy beside you."

"If he were not a boy, he would hardly have got himself into his present position," observed Hugh; "but boys who have money, and have become their own masters, are not the easiest persons in the world to manage."

It so chanced that this same afternoon Charlie met with a friend whose existence he had well-nigh forgotten—Miss Winifred Champion. He had gone for a walk with

Mr. Sheeves and the three girls, the other members of the family having taken Ann, Hugh, and Lucy for an outing in another direction. When returning to Grange House they overtook a gentleman strolling along with a young lady. The gentleman turned and nodded to Mr. Sheeves.

"How d'ye do, Lord Champlesse, how d'ye do?" exclaimed the latter. "What brings you to our part of the world?"

"We are staying close by," said Lord Champlesse, a good-looking young man with well-trimmed black whiskers and a moustache, cold in his manners and dressed as if he were in Pall Mall.

Charlie had accosted Winifred Champion, who held out a hand to him, blushing, and at once introduced him to her brother.

"Very glad to meet you," said Lord Champlesse. Then he was presented to the two Misses Sheeves, to whom he gave a collective bow. Mr. Sheeves had a speaking acquaintanceship with Lord Champlesse, whom he had met in his official capacity as an Under-Secretary of State, but his lordship had no knowledge of the Sheeves' household.

"My little place is only a few yards off," cried the tea merchant. "You'll come in with Miss Champion and have a cup of tea, won't you now?"

"Very good of you," muttered Lord Champlesse.

Pattie ran forward to prepare her mother, Mr. Sheeves paired off with Lord Champlesse, and Charlie dropped behind with Winnie, but not till Winnie had said a few pleasant words to Hettie and Bettie, so as not to let it be supposed that she wished to monopolize Mr. Harrowell. The path was too narrow, however, for the walking of more than two abreast, so Hettie and Bettie lagged some way in the rear, and passed their remarks upon the Honourable Miss Champion *sotto voce*.

Winnie was tendering her condolences to Charlie on his father's death.

"I wrote to your sisters as soon as I heard of the sad event," she said softly. "Are they both staying with you at Grange House?"

"Yes; but you had better not speak to them about what has happened," said Charlie. "We have passed through a woeful time,

Heaven knows ; but allusions to it only make them unnecessarily miserable."

"You must feel surprised to see us here," proceeded Winnie, changing the subject. "One of our friends who has a cottage here, placed it at my brother's disposal ; and, as my brother has always a great deal to do in the fortnight that follows the end of the parliamentary session, he thought he would plant my mother and me at Henley until the time came for taking his holiday. It is nicer for us than being in town whilst everybody is away ; though I must say mamma and I are alone most of the week, for Champlesse can only come down from Saturday till Monday."

"Are you so lonely as that ?" asked Charlie, absently.

"Yes ; and if our friends want to be received with gratitude, now is the time to come and see us, at Eglantine Cottage," laughed Winnie.

She might have added more, for the truth is Winnie had heard from the Blews that the Harrowells were staying at Henley, and the offer of the cottage at Henley (it was the property of a famous oarsman who kept high

revels there during the autumnal regatta), was a thing which she and her mother had schemed for without difficulty. But in her very brief acquaintanceship with Charlie Harrowell, Winnie had learned to like him, and his sudden inheritance of his father's large fortune had not rendered him less dear in her sight. Had he not, moreover, in a sort of way, proposed marriage to her?

Winnie was too quick not to see that if there had been anything serious, or even half serious, in Charlie's proposal, he must be got to renew it before his fancy was turned away from her by the adulations that beset all young millionnaires. People were saying that his father had intended buying Woodlands, and it was supposed that Charlie would carry out this plan, consequently he was marked out as a being apart amongst all the young men whom Winnie knew. She had gone the length of telling Lord Champlesse that the potential owner of Woodlands had made her an offer of his hand, and his lordship recollected this as he walked beside Mr. Sheeves.

"So that is Mr. Harrowell," he said. "Do you know if he has any intention of buying

Woodlands, about which his father was negotiating? My reason for asking is that the estate was once ours, and there are a few acres of it which I would like to buy back, but the present owner will not part with these separately, which I can well understand, for the selling value of the estate would be diminished. I have been thinking, however, that I might perhaps arrange the matter with the next buyer."

"I am, as your lordship may be aware, one of the executors of the late Mr. Harrowell's will," observed Mr. Sheeves.

"Ah, indeed! I was not aware of it," answered Lord Champlesse, thinking Mr. Sheeves intended to convey that he was the man to be spoken to, on matters of business.

"But my work is over, and Harrowell's fortune is absolutely unfettered," Mr. Sheeves hastened to add. "He has nearly three-quarters of a million to make ducks and drakes with if he likes."

"How very nice, even if he does not care for ducks and drakes," said Lord Champlesse with a smile. "Well, I suppose I had better speak to Mr. Harrowell himself?"

"I don't think he could do better than buy that Norfolk estate," answered Mr. Sheeves; "I will advise him about it, and I am sure he will be happy to oblige you, Lord Champlesse."

He meant to lay down the general proposition that anybody would, in any circumstances, be happy to oblige a lord; but the Under-Secretary made an inclination of his head, imagining that Mr. Harrowell must already have proclaimed a peculiar predilection for the house of Champion.





CHAPTER XI.

"MISS CHAMPION and Charlie Harrowell seem to be very intimate," whispered one of Mr. Sheeves's daughters to her sisters, as Lord Champlesse and Winnie walked into the garden of Grange House.

These damsels already had their eyes on Miss Champion. During the half hour of tea-drinking they noted every look of Winnie's, every inflection of her voice, and every display of her pretty teeth (which they inwardly reprobated as "grinning"); finally their united opinion of her was that she was forward, a term which is mostly applied by girls to competitors who seem likely to run first to the winning-post.

Brothers are such bad match-makers (as all mothers well know), that Lord Champlesse scarcely took any notice of Charlie, but he

fell into conversation with Lucy Harrowell, whose serious discoursing struck his fancy. Mrs. Sheeves, never suspecting that Winnie might be a rival to her own girls, was won over by a compliment to her roses and chickens, (whose renown, avouched Winnie, filled the land), and she invited the pretty flatterer to repeat her visits often.

"If you play tennis, Miss Champion, I hope you will come to us for a game whenever you like."

"With pleasure," said Winnie. "Our lawn at the cottage is not large enough for tennis. But such as the place is, Mrs. Sheeves, I trust you and your daughters will come to see it. Mamma seldom goes out, but she will be delighted to receive you." Then she turned to Charlie. "And you will call on mamma, too, Mr. Harrowell? She will expect your visit."

"I am afraid I must ask Lady Champlesse to excuse me, as I shall be returning to London early to-morrow," replied Charlie.

"Not a bit of it," interposed Mr. Sheeves. "You have got some important papers to sign, and to save you the trouble of going

up to the town, the lawyer's clerk is going to bring them down here."

"Oh!" exclaimed Charlie, and would have added, "How provoking!" if he could have done so politely. "In that case," he said, "I must send a telegram to London."

"That's right, send a telegram and say you will be at Henley for at least another week," laughed Mr. Sheeves. "One of the grooms shall take it to the station."

But it did not suit Charlie that the groom should read his telegram to Mabel, so he said he would accompany Miss Champion and her brother as far as Eglantine Cottage, which lay on the road to the railway station. Winnie saw that he was cross at something, and wondered at what.

"Those are very nice girls," she remarked, as they left the grounds of Grange House.

"Mrs. Sheeves's daughters? Oh yes, they are jolly girls."

"And so pretty too."

"I suppose some people would call them pretty."

"Dear me! what a pasha-like way of speaking," laughed Winnie. "Haven't you

an eye for a pretty girl when you see one, Mr. Harrowell?"

"Oh yes, Miss Champion," he answered, glancing round involuntarily at her, so that she cast her eyes down.

"And pray shall you not be favouring us any more with your company after next Tuesday?" she continued.

"I think not. I shall probably be going abroad soon."

Her face fell, and she allowed her brother to cut in with some observation about the weather. Charlie on his side remembered what had happened at Taplow, and felt that he ought to convey a plain intimation that his affections were engaged. He was not going to let himself be drawn into any repetition of the flirtation at Mrs. Blew's.

Yet one weighty reason restrained him from speaking out. He had requested his sisters to keep his engagement secret, and he had renounced all idea of mentioning it to Mr. Sheeves, because it had occurred to him that if he talked on the subject he would certainly be asked when he was going to marry. Now Ann had put off her marriage

with Hugh until the end of her year's mourning, and she would assuredly be shocked if she heard that her brother meant to marry in haste. Mr. and Mrs. Sheeves might also consider such a proceeding unseemly. Yet Charlie was determined that his marriage should suffer no delay.

Winnie walked beside him in silence, whilst he talked with Lord Champlesse. Not knowing where Eglantine Cottage was situated, it escaped his notice that he was being conducted straight to the railway station. On their arrival Lord Champlesse said, "We will wait outside while you send your telegram."

Charlie went in and sent this message to Mabel. "*Am detained here till Tuesday, darling ; but on that day will return without fail. My sisters behaved well about our engagement. Both approve it.*"

The party then retraced their steps, and Charlie thought he should best break through his difficulties by letting out that he was going to America. Lord Champlesse gave him the opportunity by alluding to Woodlands and the capital shooting on that estate.

"Within a month I shall be on my way to New York," said Charlie.

"Oh, indeed! I thought we were going to see something of you in Norfolk."

"My father, I believe, thought of buying Woodlands," answered Charlie; "but if I become a landowner, it will be in America."

"A fine country," remarked Lord Champlesse, and composedly dilated on the statistics of wheat imports from the United States.

Winnie concealed her mortification. Charlie had spoken in a tone of calculated indifference, meaning plainly to intimate that there was nothing in common between himself and her. Of course she could not follow him to America, half his attractions in her sight would be gone if he did not become the lord of Woodlands.

Yet on their reaching Eglantine Cottage she did the honours of the little house as cheerfully as though she had received no wound. The place was a mere cockleshell, the home of a bachelor who spent most of his time on the river, and covered his walls with trophies that he had won in rowing.

Lady Champlesse sat in a little drawing

room surrounded by pictures of outrigger eight-oars, wooden models of outriggers, oar blades with gilt inscriptions, faded silk flags, silver goblets, and such things. It has been said that she was a lady of gracious mien and quiet manners. She received Charlie with a kind shake of the hand, and looked at him with interest, both because of his recent misfortune, and because of the understanding which she imagined to be existing between him and her daughter.

On this last account, she was surprised to hear her son carry on his conversation about America, merely observing, in explanation, that Mr. Harrowell thought of emigrating to the United States.

"Not for long, I hope?" said Lady Champlesse.

"Well, I thought of settling there altogether," answered Charlie, shyly.

"Oh, but that would be dreadful!" exclaimed Lady Champlesse, puzzled. "You would surely not exchange the position of an English landowner for that of a colonist, felling trees and roughing it in backwoods."

"Well, mother, Mr. Harrowell must know

his own business best," laughed Lord Champlesse, with that aggravating wisdom which young men are always showing.

"I should have thought there were so many things that would keep you in England," proceeded Lady Champlesse, who fancied that Charlie must be yielding to a fit of despondency caused by his father's lugubrious end. "Why, you might become a magistrate, and go into Parliament as member for the county. As owner of Woodlands, you would enter the best society of Norfolk.

It had just struck Winnie that perhaps Charlie Harrowell was afraid to pay his court to her now that such a tragical event had happened in his family; so she ejaculated—

"But, mamma, Mr. Harrowell must see Woodlands before it can have in his eyes the attractions which it possesses for us."

"Oh, but Mr. Harrowell and his sisters should come and pay us a visit," said her ladyship impulsively. "Have your sisters made their plans for this winter, Mr. Harrowell? If not, my son and I will be

delighted if they will come and stay with us for a week or two at Naught Hall."

"Delighted, I'm sure," echoed Lord Champlesse.

As Lady Champlesse went on singing the praises of an English country gentleman's life, it flashed upon Charlie that he was perhaps taking an extreme measure in expatriating himself. As a rich squire, he would be able to lift Mabel into a position above attack, and possibly render her happier than she could be in a strange country. But on second thoughts, he saw this would not do. Mabel must be taken to a land where nobody would care what she was or who she had been; her peace and his would only be purchased at that price. So Lady Champlesse's well-meant gossip only threw him into perplexity, and made him pensive as he walked back alone to the Grange.

The first dinner-gong had just sounded, and Charlie met Ann, who was going upstairs to dress. He put her into a dilemma at once by asking whether she had yet answered Mabel's letter. She had not; and

avowed that she knew not how she should reply to Mrs. Snow.

"Why can't you say to her what you told me ; that you quite approve our marriage, and will be her affectionate friend ?"

"I don't think I put it in that way, Charlie. I said, or meant to say, that if you were quite determined——"

"Of course, I am quite determined ; now you are not going back on your own words, Annie."

"Don't be angry, Charlie," pleaded Ann. "I have no objection to Mabel Snow, but how can any of us like her brother, Mr. Travers ?"

"There you are, at Travers again ;" and Charlie threw up his arms.

"But let me ask you one thing, Charlie ; what good has that man ever done you ?"

"He introduced me to Mabel, and that is enough to lay me under a lifelong obligation to him."

"Yes ; but has he been quite candid with you in money matters. Hasn't he borrowed of you ? Hugh and I have been afraid——"

"I wish Hugh would mind his own business!" exclaimed Charlie, very crossly. "I have not gone for money to him. I don't interfere with his friends, and Annie, if you think that when you have married Hugh he is to act as a sort of private tutor to me, you are egregiously mistaken."

"No, I do not think that," answered Ann, who saw that she had been wrong to risk this encounter. "I am only speaking as your sister, and with some resentment, I confess, against a man who I fear has often led you wrong."

"As to that, I think you ought to know my opinion once and for all," responded Charlie. "Travers never advised me to do things that were wrong in themselves, for it is not wrong to go to the theatre, nor even to borrow money when you give an insurance on your own life as security—which is really all that I did. Travers advised me, like a man of the world who thought our poor father held me in too much. The wrong-doing was on my side, for not having shown submission to my father. If I had committed a theft, should I be justified in

saying that Travers advised me? I don't think Adam gained much by that mean defence of his : *The woman tempted me, and I did eat.*"

"No," said Ann; "but the serpent came in for his share of condemnation, too."

However, the upshot of this was that Ann went to consult Lucy as to what kind of letter she would write, and Lucy took her brother's side.

"I do hate half-heartedness," said she. "This poor woman has made a generous appeal to you, and she must be waiting with woeful anxiety for your answer. You should write to her just as you feel."

"I feel that I wish she and Charlie had never met," declared Ann.

"I cannot join in this feeling," responded Lucy. "It amounts to wishing that our path should always be strewn with rose-leaves, that we should never meet any but perfectly nice and agreeable people. But when should we ever find opportunity for the display of charity and other good qualities if we were never put to the trial? I do believe that there are some good souls

who would like all people who give the slightest trouble to be quietly drowned."

"I do not wish Mrs. Snow to be drowned," protested Ann; "and I dare say it is wicked of me to feel as I do. Yet, Lucy, prudence is among the virtues."

"The prudence that made the Levite pass by on the other side is no virtue, Annie. Have you any balm that can heal a wounded soul or body! then give it as the Samaritan did." And she pointed to the inkstand which contained the balm that Ann could pour out for Mabel Snow.

Still Ann hesitated over the sheet of blank paper, till Lucy, looking up from a book, perceived that she had not written a line.

"I cannot say that I am glad Charlie is in love with her, for that would be untrue," murmured Ann, throwing down the pen.

"But you can say that you feel for her."

"I do not think I can write that sincerely," answered Ann, sitting back with her chin resting on her hand. "I must know more about her before I can write a sentence that would be really acceptable."

"Let me see if I cannot help you!" ex-

claimed Lucy, approaching the table, and between them the sisters concocted this :

“ DEAR MRS. SNOW,

“ Be assured from my sister and me that our dear brother's wife will have the strongest claim on our affection. We shall pray that you may find a consolation for your past troubles in the years of happiness that may still lie before you.

“ Yours faithfully,

“ ANN HARROWELL.”

“ Was it necessary to say our ‘*dear* brother’ ?” queried Lucy, as she re-read the letter. “ A brother is dear, of course.”

“ Not ‘ of course,’ by any means,” replied Ann. “ I was thinking of her own brother when I wrote that. He cannot be dear to her as Charlie is to us.”

“ She may love him, for all his faults, or may be blind to them.”

“ Yet he cannot be dear to her as Charlie is to us,” repeated Ann, with a shake of the head ; “ and I want to impress upon her that our brother is very precious in our sight.

That must be our excuse if my letter is not sufficiently warm."

The next morning Hugh returned to his work in London, after a renewed promise to Ann that he would keep an eye on Travers. Charlie went with him to the station, rather for the walk than for his company, and partly because he was beginning to find the amiability of the Sheeves girls a little overpowering.

Ann, going into the garden soon afterwards, discovered the three sisters with their brother Bob, patting balls rather disconsolately over the tennis net. They fancied Charlie had gone to Eglantine Cottage, and spoke of this as though they had a grievance, and expected Ann to sympathize.

But Ann said nothing while stopping to watch the resumption of the listless play. It would not have been astonishing that her brother should pay a morning call at Eglantine Cottage, and in this connection she fell to musing how nice it would have been if Charlie had fallen in love with Winifred Champion. Here, now, was a girl who had everything in her favour—rank, breeding,

beauty, a sunny temper, and charming manners. Of the Mesdemoiselles Sheeves, Ann had never thought in any matrimonial relations. They were nice girls, but belonged to that class of damsels of whom one expects that they shall always remain nice girls. The common fate of matronly cares and grey hairs does not seem to belong to such as they. Who thinks what will become of the butterfly when the summer season of flitting is gone?

Presently Charlie returned to the Grange, swinging his stick and looking rather happy. He was in spirits about nothing in particular, except that he had slept and breakfasted well, and that the morning walk had done him good.

But the Sheeves girls were growing impatient that he should join their sport. So he took off his coat and caught up a racket. He was not a good player, and, as he cut wildly at the balls, and often overreached himself, Pattie, who was his partner, had to teach him that it was no use hitting as if he meant to score "fours" at cricket. Next minute he caught one of Hettie's balls

full on the cheek instead of on his racket, and in another moment, as he was wearing ordinary boots, he stumbled and measured his length on the sward. In that way he provided entertainment for his friends, whilst evidently satisfying himself that he was having a good time.

And then, when the game was over, and when Mrs. Sheeves appeared bustling towards the poultry-yard with an earthenware basin full of steaming meal, how perfect he was in running to her assistance, opening the wicket, and offering to help in apportioning the mixture. Will it be believed that he joined in the chase after a proud and indignant turkey-cock who had to be physicked, and when he had caught this bird, nothing could exceed his skill in holding him between his knees and elongating his neck with his left hand like a stocking, while Mrs. Sheeves passed an anxious hand over his—the fowl's—bosom.

“How his heart is beating!” she exclaimed.

“Perhaps he's in love,” suggested Charlie.

“No, he's asthmatic,” answered Mrs. Sheeves, who understood no jesting when

her pets were concerned. "Now, if you wouldn't mind just opening his beak a little, I could get this spoon in."

But Charlie's first attempt caused the beak to close upon his forefinger, and that so sharply that the blood spurted, and he had to let the turkey go.

"Poor bird! do you think he is hurt?" ejaculated Mrs. Sheeves.

"Oh no; he's a game cock, and he has drawn first blood," laughed Charlie; but, although he had to twist his finger in a handkerchief, he chevied the fugitive again, caught him and held him until the spoon had been introduced with a motherly firmness into his gullet.

Only then, when the scandalized turkey was shaking himself in the middle of the yard—every feather of him in a huff—did Mrs. Sheeves notice that Charlie's finger was bleeding.

"Why, I thought the blood was the poor bird's. I see it's yours."

"Never mind; Mrs. Sheeves, it might have been spilt in a worse cause."

Hettie, Bettie and Pattie, were witnesses

of this scene, and it made them rejoice. Decidedly they were confirmed in the opinion that Charlie was a good fellow. Yet somehow they were no longer in such haste to communicate their impressions about him to one another. In their customary conference, whilst washing hands before lunch, he did not furnish the staple of conversation. During a day and a half, it had been Charlie here, and Charlie there, but now each sister wondered privately whether the others had observed certain little traits of character, the pleasant discovery whereof she would fain have kept to herself. True to the unwritten compact of their sisterhood, the three girls ever meant to be. If Charlie should single out one, the two would fall back so as not to spoil sport; but it was no longer clear to either of the three that she would be free from heart-burn, if her lot fell to be numbered with "the two."

It is a question whether, in flirting with a serious purpose, a pretty girl gains or loses by having two pretty sisters. If the three play fair, two can make the running for the third, and the favoured one has this advantage,

that the wooer will credit her with having all the qualities that shine in her sisters besides her own ; but, on the other hand, a man can say to three sisters much sweeter things than he would dare say to one, and yet mean nothing at all. Sugar-plums, cherries, pearls, soap bubbles, and such dainty things are not meant to be divided among three. Now Charlie had thrown plenty of compliments to be scrambled for among the girls, but neither Hettie, nor Bettie, nor Pattie, felt that she had got anything for herself.

Grown diffident of battle-doring Charlie's name between them, the sisters demonstrated their continuing union by falling foul of Winifred Champion.

"I hope that simpering Miss Champion will not pay us another visit this afternoon," ejaculated Hettie. It was an utter libel to call Winnie's laugh a simper ; but no matter.

"I like her chatter even less than her laugh," said Bettie ; "a magpie is the most tiresome of birds." (Let it be noted that from this moment the nickname of *Magpie* was affixed to Winnie in all talk between the girls.)

"The Magpie is coming, though, for I heard Charlie say so," remarked Pattie, dabbling her hands in water. "It seems that Lady Champlesse will condescend to pay mamma the first visit."

Lady Champlesse did mean to perform this act of condescension, and she brought her daughter with her just after lunch. But her ladyship, being mild and amiable, put no touch of condescension into what she did. Her dignity was no high-stepping horse, but a quiet ambler. Hettie, Bettie, and Pattie were subdued by the gracious and graceful way in which she "my-deared" them in her first sentence.

As for Winnie, they were in despair at her. If only she would have presumed on her rank, so that a charge of conceit might have been brought against her. But it was misery to feel that she would have borne herself just as prettily as she did if she had been a plain Miss Nobody. The peerage had nothing to do with the sparkle of her mocking eyes, nor with the fit of her green tailor-made dress. By-and-by she stood up to play tennis—for an invitation to this end had

to be offered by the girls—and then again, with her lithe figure, quick movements, and well-trained skill, she carried off all the honours.

Hettie and Bettie played well, and they flushed in their endeavours to strike balls which Winnie could not hit. But Winnie brushed away the hardest balls from her like flies. Back-hand strokes, round-arm hits, scooping, cutting or driving—it was all the same to her. Charlie was her partner, so she had to play for the two. Bob and Pattie watched the game with growing interest—the former not so eager about the performance of his sisters as the latter, for Pattie would have given all the shillings in her purse to see that really provoking Magpie put to discomfiture. Instead of that, she had to behold Hettie and Bettie vanquished.

“There! But I’ve had ever so many flukes,” cried Winnie, as she scored the winning hit by a stroke which sent the ball just half an inch over the net, and so deftly that it scarce rebounded.

“I couldn’t see that you missed a single chance, Miss Champion,” said the gallant

Bob; and so his sisters agreed, for they would have scorned to betray vexation at a fair defeat. They were thoroughly English girls in the give-and-take at all games.

Still the whole thing was a disappointment to them. Winnie had laid herself out to please Charlie, and it seemed to the girls that Charlie was being caught. An allusion was made as to his going to America, and they could get no explanations from him on the subject, much as it exercised their minds. This threw a gloom over the evening, and on the following day, when Charlie bid his adieus to the Grange, he so fenced against the pressing question of when he was coming back, that he went away leaving a sense of constraint behind him.

Ann felt he had been almost uncivil, and her face burned. She could not resist the inquiries which Mrs. Sheeves made with anxious looks, and at last she burst into tears. Then the whole story came out how Charlie was in love, and whom he loved, and how miserable Ann and Hugh were about it.

All Mrs. Sheeves's fowls might have

shrieked together for medicine without catching her ear as she hearkened to this astounding narrative.

"Why, it's madness, my dear!" she gasped. "John, you ought to go up to London at once and stop this. Quick! there's a train in ten minutes."

"Fetch me my hat," shouted Mr. Sheeves. "This woman is an adventuress. Charlie will be ruined for life if we don't save him."

And he bounded out of the house as if he were running for a fire-engine.





CHAPTER XII.

HUGH ARMSTRONG returned to town, as we know, with the intention of trying to discover something about Chauncey Travers' antecedents. But to a man who loathed spying, such work was not easy. One thing Hugh Armstrong did learn pretty soon, and that was that Travers had lied in his reports of the encounter between himself and Captain Job Ramshart.

A telegram to Tobias Ramshart procured him the captain's address, and he called upon the latter at his club on the very evening of his return to London. Jobie Ramshart was indignantly amused at the idea that Travers—or, for the matter of that, any man in the world—could have thrashed him. Being a little strip of a fellow not much over five feet

high (yet all wire and watch-spring), he had immense ideas of his own powers as a bruiser. He was a dressy little man, who wore white gaiters with his patent-leather boots, and kept a glass so tightly screwed in his right eye that he had no need of a string to it.

"Why, the fellow is a downright cad!" he cried, giving a pugnacious twist to his moustache. "He tried to get an advertisement for his rascally paper from a company of which I am a director; and, as we would not give it, he fell foul of me and called me a swindler in print. So I punished him."

"Then there's nothing true in the story of your having insulted his sister?"

"I didn't know the hound had a sister. There was a devilish pretty woman with him when we came to blows, and of course, if I had seen her in the first instance, I should have let him off. But when she appeared on the scene it was too late."

Having said which, Captain Jobie Ramshart, late of the Hussars, reiterated his opinion of Chauncey Travers, his works, and his kinsfolk in a series of strong words beginning with *D*.

Indeed, from the certainty that Travers was a liar, to the inference that his sister was an adventuress, was but a short step, and when Hugh Armstrong left Captain Ramshart—fully persuaded that the latter had spoken the truth—he felt very curious to see Mrs. Snow. One glance at her face, he thought (just as though men had never been taken in by a pretty face!), would settle the point whether she were an honest woman or not.

He might call at her hotel and ask her frankly for explanations. Yes; but she might send him about his business, and the only result of this would be a deadly quarrel between himself and Charlie. Hugh was not on sufficiently affectionate terms with his future brother-in-law to brave a temporary misunderstanding with him for the sake of doing him a lasting good.

In his perplexity he fell back upon the idea of consulting Tobias Ramshart, and the next day walked out to see the curate at Hamilton Road, Highbury. Mr. Ramshart was out, and the maid-servant said that he would not be back till tea-time: so Hugh

left word that he would call again, and by way of killing time took train to Barnet and had a long afternoon's stroll in Hadley Woods. The sum of his sylvan cogitations was that no means have yet been discovered of preventing a young man with money from having his own way, and that he (Hugh) had much better resist the impulse that was driving him to meddle. It must be enough for him that Ann Harrowell in her new home need not of necessity have any contact with her brother's wife ; and as for Lucy, she could live with her sister until she, in her turn, got married.

It so happened that on this very day Lucy Harrowell and Mabel Snow had both been constantly in Tobias Ramshart's thoughts. He had heard from Inspector Dadge of Mabel's visit to Finsbury Park, but the inspector, when he brought these tidings, was the worse for liquor, and said such strange things that the curate could not treat him as a reasonable being. He marvelled much that a police official should be not only drunk, but so evidently on the verge of *delirium tremens*, and he wondered the more at the mysterious

allusions to Mrs. Snow which Dadge kept making. Between hiccoughs and incoherent maundering, the tipsy fellow prated about Mrs. Snow, till at length he snivelled out that if he had had such a wife it would have been the saving of him.

This set the curate on a wrong track, and he imagined that Dadge had taken to drinking because he had paid unsuccessful court to Mabel. The sight of the man in his disgraceful condition rendered this idea so repulsive that Mr. Ramshart was minded to pay Dadge a visit and expostulate seriously with him upon his ways. But having much to do, he put off his mission until the morrow.

He came home to his six-o'clock tea after a hard day's work, and found Hugh Armstrong's card along with this note :

“ SIR,

“ Mr. Dadge, the inspector, who lodges in this house, was taken very ill in the night, and he has been crying out for you—I might say, raving—all the morning. As he is in a dreadful state, Miss Barbottle, who carries on the Post-Office in Mrs. Snow's

stead, and I we should both be glad if you would come to see him, and oblige,

“Your obedient servant,

“MADGE ROSE.

“P.S.—He was so bad about dinner-time, that two policemen had to hold him.”

The curate, who had opened this note in the hall, requested the maid-servant to bring him up his tea with all speed, as he would have to go out again. He said, however, that he would remain at home till half-past six, that being the time which Hugh Armstrong had appointed for his second call.

He was very tired. He had been working all the afternoon at that heart-breaking labour which consists in carrying kind words to homes where money is wanted, in trying to plant hopes where they cannot grow, in attempting to rekindle the last sparks of faith in embers drenched with misery and cold with unbelief. If faith be so dead in many of those who have received every boon that should foster belief, how can it live in those who see in their utter wretchedness no signs of Divine care or justice? To distribute

words where he had nothing else to give was often more than the curate could bear to do. But he persevered in his work on the strength of his own faith, teaching him that the smallest stone honestly hewn and truly laid is accepted by the Master, and is used by Him for the paving of the great highway between earth and heaven.

The curate had cheerful rooms, and there was that air of refinement in them which belongs to the apartments of those clergymen who love to surround themselves with books and memorials of their college lives. He threw himself into an arm-chair to rest, and Hugh's card set him thinking of Lucy Harrowell, whom he loved with a shy love which he had never dared confess. He had been asking himself often of late whether Lucy, who had helped him so assiduously as a district visitor, would, now that she had come to such great estate, remember, not him,—he scarcely aspired to that,—but the poor among whom she had dwelt, and towards whom she had yearned so pityingly when she had but little money?

The servant-girl brought up the tray, and

the curate had nearly finished his modest meal of tea and toast spread with bloater paste, when his watch pointed to twenty minutes past six. "I hope Armstrong will be punctual," he soliloquized; and a few minutes later Hugh's heavy step creaked on the stairs.

"My dear fellow, you have called at rather an unfortunate hour," said the curate, after they had shaken hands. "It happens that I am obliged to go out."

"No matter," said Hugh, without taking a chair. "I will walk part of the way with you, wherever you are going. I only want you to tell me in a few words what you know of a Mrs. Snow and of her brother—one Travers."

"Mrs. Snow? What do you know about her?"

Hugh was not long in telling all that he knew, and Ramshart listened with startled attention. So it was true then—Mabel Snow and the Baroness de la Neva were one and the same person, and the truth had come out without any interference on his part. It lifted a great load from the curate's mind

to think, that by keeping his promise to Mrs. Snow, he had not rendered himself the accomplice in any continuing deceit. With deep thankfulness was it too that he saw Mabel Snow reinstated in his good opinion, for to him Mabel's confession of her own identity seemed a great point in her favour.

"You have learned more than I knew a few minutes ago," he said to Armstrong. "It is most strange and mysterious, but I may tell you now that I am going to see a man who was prominently mixed up in these affairs." Then he, in his turn, related what facts had come to his knowledge, his sojourn at Portland, his promise to Mabel, his scene with Charlie Harrowell, and lastly, his talks with Inspector Dadge.

"And you truly believe that Dr. Snow was innocent?" asked Hugh, with a scrutinizing look.

"Every time I spoke with him, I believed it. The one great stumbling-block in his case was the pecuniary interest which he had in his father-in-law's death, through the life insurance; but, then, Travers was interested as much as he, and, as a matter

of fact, it was Travers who got all the money."

"How so?" And Hugh, who had begun to pace about the room, stopped short.

"Why, Captain Travers's life was insured for the benefit of both his children, and as manifestly neither of them had anything to do with his death, the office paid both claims. But Travers took care of his sister after Dr. Snow's arrest; and, helpless as Mrs. Snow was, he got all the money into his possession. I must tell you at once though," added the curate impressively, "that no suspicion could attach to Travers. His *alibi* was most clearly proved."

"How was he called upon to prove an *alibi*, if no suspicion attached to him?"

"I mean that the police and the insurance office made particular inquiries as to his whereabouts at the time of the murder."

"Did Snow himself suspect anybody?"

"He never told me that he did. It was one of the most melancholy features in his case, that he sometimes persuaded himself that he must have committed the murder

unconsciously. He was a distracted, heart-broken man, poor fellow !”

The curate was drawing on his gloves. The conversation had been spun out to half an hour and now dusk was gathering.

“If you have nothing to do this evening, will you come with me and see Dadge ?” he suggested to Hugh. “We may hear something new from him.”

“I must be at the *Express* office by ten o'clock,” answered Hugh ; “but it will be time if I start from Finsbury Park at half-past nine.” And so they sallied out together.

Ramshart's purse being slender, he would have walked had he been alone, for even the threepenny tramway fares were a consideration to him ; but Hugh hailed a hansom from the stand near the public-house where Highbury Barn once stood, and he made his friend jump in.

“That Travers is an odd fish,” he remarked, as the cab bowled down the Blackstock Road. “You were speaking about an *alibi* ; now listen to this.” And he gave the story of Alderman Harrowell's missing bank-notes which had been traced to Paris, and of

his own encounter in Paris as well as on the Channel steamer with a man amazingly like Travers—this just after Mr. Harrowell's death.

“And he denied to you that he was the same man?” said Ramshart, who had uttered an ejaculation or two during the recital.

“Well, he flatly denied to me, as I have told you, that he was Mrs. Snow's brother; and I cannot to this moment imagine why he braved me with such an audacious falsehood. —The man is a puzzle to me,” muttered Hugh. “I fear that was a downright lie as to his having given your brother a thrashing for having insulted Mrs. Snow; and if he lied about that, he is a fellow whose past life cannot bear scrutiny. As to his sister——”

“Oh, as to her, you must see her before you can judge,” interrupted the curate warmly. “A woman may have a bad brother, and yet be herself irreproachable.”

“Such things have been seen,” answered Hugh, sceptically, and he quoted the lines—

“If to her chance some human errors fall,
Look on her face and you'll forget them all.”

"No, no; believe me, it's nothing of that kind," protested the clergyman. "You must see her. Pope never had a woman like Mrs. Snow in his mind's eye."

But here the hansom, having run its course along the Green Lanes, stopped. It was a quarter-past seven, the gas in the stationer's shop had just been lighted, and Miss Barbottle, the official young lady who took charge of the post-office, was buttoning her brown jacket preparatory to going home. She was a severe-looking damsel, with a pointed nose and a frosty manner, who drew herself up a little when the curate asked her for news of Inspector Dadge's health.

"I have nothing to do with the house and shop," she said, "it's Miss Rose who attends to that. But I may be permitted to say that Inspector Dadge's case is a very sad one, and ought to be an example to us all. Will you kindly accept these?" And with frigid gestures Miss Barbottle presented to the Rev. Tobias a tract entitled: "*Have another Glass of Gin,*" and to Hugh Armstrong, one with the superscription, "*Take yours Hot, Sweet, and Strong.*" Having so done, she

adjusted her hat with a pin a foot long, wished the gentlemen a good evening, and sailed out.

Madge Rose came forward at this moment with a pale, disturbed face ; but seeing the tracts, looked inclined to laugh.

“ Miss Barbottle is very strong on temperance, gentlemen, and since she has been here the shop windows have been filled with notices of teetotal meetings and such things. But we can't wonder at all she says, after what has happened to that inspector. Dear ! dear ! You never heard a man shriek as he did all the morning. Once or twice we had quite a crowd round the house. I think he's asleep now.”

“ Drink ? ” inquired Hugh.

“ Yes, sir,” answered Madge, with some awe at the speaker's stalwart figure. “ It took him all of a sudden in the night, and if mother hadn't been staying with me here, I should have been frightened out of my life. Luckily, too, there was a policeman on his beat just outside at the time, and he came in to hold Mr. Dadge, who else would have broken every window, chair, and table in the place—so mad was he.”

"Does this shop still belong to Mrs. Snow?" asked the curate.

"Yes, sir, it's still hers; but she's asked me to keep it on for her a little longer, so I've had my mother here to stay with me, for I couldn't live in the place alone. I'll call mother, gentlemen; she's upstairs with Mr. Dadge."

In response to her daughter's summons, a very tidy, rather fretful old woman came downstairs, and at sight of the clergyman clasped her hands.

"Lor, a mussy, sir! One don't know whether to pray that the poor man may die or get over it. An hour ago he was yelling fit to break the gas globes. He thinks the rats is at him."

She led the way mumbling upstairs to the inspector's bedroom. A couple of policemen were there, with their tunics off, and their blue-striped shirts with black stocks and leather braces exposed to view. They had been taking a snack of bread and cheese and beer, while they watched the bed. The inspector was lying clumsily tied down by some flat girths which pinioned his arms and kept his

two feet sticking out between the japanned bars at the lower end of the bed. He was snoring loudly, with his face congested and purple, his body bathed in sweat, and all his limbs trembling convulsively. A nauseous effluvium of alcohol turned bad hung about the room.

"Has a doctor seen him?" inquired Hugh, addressing the constables, after taking a glance at the patient.

"Yes, sir; the surgeon of the force has been round twice to-day," said one of the men. "We couldn't keep it from him, for the superintendent had to be told about it this morning, when he came round to the station."

"Do you know if this is his first attack?" asked the curate.

"I think it is, sir; and it's been a dreadful bad one. We knew he was pretty free with the bottle, but he was always more or less fit for duty, till last night the horrors took him all at once. Begging your pardon, you're Mr. Ramshart, sir? The inspector has been hollaring all day for you. He's got some trouble on his mind, as seems to me."

Tobias Ramshart had seen more of *delirium*

tremens than Hugh Armstrong. As he stood by the bed, he observed in a whisper that Dadge was too tightly strapped, but he would not let the policeman loosen the girths, lest the patient should awake. Hugh wanted to know how long the man was likely to sleep.

"Is he going to snore on like that till morning?"

"This kind of sleep never lasts long," said the curate, "but the waking is fearful."

Even as he was speaking one of the policemen upset a chair which was top-heavy from having two tunics on its back. The noise roused Dadge from his stupor. He opened his eyelids, made an effort to raise himself, and failing, fixed his two fiery, frightened eyes on the curate.

"Mr. Ramshart, is that you, sir?" he moaned almost inaudibly. "What am I tied like this for? Give me something to drink; my tongue's a-burning me . . . Oh, my head, it's splitting! How everything do go round!"

He closed his eyes again with a groan and a long shudder which made the bed shake. A constable brought a glass of water, and the curate, raising his head with one hand, helped

him to drink, or rather tilted the water between his dry cracked lips into his parched mouth. The effort to swallow almost made him choke, and he had a violent fit of coughing which ended in hiccoughs and retching. Exhausted and giddy, he lay panting. The hot fumes of alcohol were roaring through his head like escaped steam from a boiler, and he could only complain about his aching head, groan and cry with hysterical tears.

Suddenly he uttered a piercing shriek and began a frantic struggle to free himself. "Those rats! they're on me again! Beat 'em off! Don't let 'em come! Hie! don't let 'em!"

"They shan't touch you; there, I am beating them off," exclaimed the curate, whisking his handkerchief over the bed, for he knew it was of no use to fight against the hallucination.

"No. Hie! that big black one is at me. Don't let me be eaten like a dog. Cowards, all of you! Murder! Help!"

Agonized with terror, he shook himself, bounding in the bed and gnashing his teeth till one of the cords that bound his arms was

wrenched from the bed frame. Then the two policemen had to spring forward and hold him down by main force, until they had tied him again, while his paroxysm spent itself and left him all unnerved, broken, and sobbing incoherent things.

"What a sickening sight !" said Hugh to the two constables who stood with streaming faces.

"Yet that attack wasn't so bad as some of 'em," answered one of the men. "The job was to get him lashed to the bed, and we should never have managed it, if the surgeon and the old lady downstairs hadn't helped us."

"But the man can't be left to lie there," proceeded Hugh.

"If he's not better to-morrow morning, the doctor says he'll have to go to Colney Hatch, sir ; but he's been kept here to-day in the hopes it might pass off."

The delirium from which Dadge was suffering does not rob its wretched victim of all consciousness. He lies as though bound to a horizontal wheel that spins round and round, his head chasing his heels. He can see who are around him, he is aware of his own helplessness.

ness and degradation, but he cannot control his thoughts or his speech. Balance of body and mind are gone alike. Yet the effort is kept up in him to think and to speak clearly, and with it remains the feeling which makes him now despairing, now madly reckless—that he is a drunken, powerless, pitiable creature.

“I won’t drink any more,” muttered the miserable man, in a drowsy voice and with his eyes closed. “Not a drop. It’s been the ruin of me. Oh, my poor wife! Ay, it’s down in the charge sheet.”

His words became unintelligible, they related to his police duties. The revolving brain tossed up thoughts more quickly than they could be poured through the channel of his mouth, and by the time the heavy tongue could be set in motion by one idea, the mind had turned to another.

“I think I’ll try him with a question,” said Ramshart, as Dadge’s words became thicker and slower, and seemed to ooze out of him. Then briskly he asked: “Inspector, did you wish to speak to me about Mrs. Snow?”

The two eyes opened again, wide and horror-stricken.

“Snow’s dead. They didn’t hang him ; so his blood don’t rest on me. Mr. Ramshart you want to know the truth. They can’t prove it against me—nobody saw me do it. It’s all up when the jury has spoke. But why do yer send out a policeman on night duty alone ? Here, you two, go out together. Got your lanterns and your truncheons and your rattles all right ? . . . That’s it, keep together ; and if he springs on yer out of the hedge, you can master him between you. Don’t hurt him ! Spring your rattles. . . . louder—louder. Murder ! Help ! Hie ! there’s them rats again ! Murder !

He had another paroxysm in which he screamed like a hog in the butcher’s clutch. Every bar in the iron bedstead rattled, and Hugh and Ramshart both thought that he ought not to be tied down. His upturned, roaring, blackening face made them dread the breaking of a blood-vessel. But at last his vociferations became hoarser, and were gradually strangled off into an expiring gurgle. Once more he lay voiceless and gasping, with his eyes shut and his limbs shaking.

“ Did you catch those words of his ? ” asked the curate of Hugh in a low tone : “ ‘ *They can't prove it against me—nobody saw me do it.* ’ ”

Hugh nodded. “ What do you make of those words ? ”

“ He has some trouble on his conscience. He was thinking of the murder of Captain Travers. ”

“ I think I'll go up to the office though, ” said Hugh, consulting his watch. “ I'll try and get my work done early, and then come back ; or, if they can spare me for this evening, I'll return immediately. ”

Before going, he asked the policemen whether Dadge had any relations, and they told him that he had a married sister, who took care of his children, and had been telegraphed for. She lived near Reading.

Hugh's hansom was waiting for him. As he went downstairs he found Mrs. Rose in conference at the private street door with a small girl who had been sent by one of the neighbouring tradesmen to complain of the noise which the patient was making.

“If you please, ma’am,” the girl was saying, “Mr. Brills wants to know whether the gentleman upstairs is likely to go on hollaring like that all night?”





CHAPTER XIII.

It was no later than eleven when Hugh Armstrong returned from the City. He could not well be spared from his office, but he had told his editor that he was scarcely in the mood for writing a leader, and the editor understood this when he got an inkling of how his valued assistant had been spending the fore part of the evening.

The two policemen who had attended Dadge all day had gone off duty, and two others had come to keep watch. One of these was lying curled up for a nap on the sofa of the sitting-room, and the other was reading a weekly newspaper by the light of a petroleum lamp, also in the sitting-room. On Hugh's noiseless appearance, the curate came out on tiptoe from the contiguous bed-chamber and pointed to a decent, middle

aged woman in "Sunday best," who was curtsying in the shadow of the door.

"That is Mrs. Greyling, Dadge's sister."

"Has he spoken again?" inquired Hugh.

"Yes; and I think I see things more plainly now. But wait a moment, he has just had another awful attack—the worst of all."

"Mr. Ramshart!" cried Mrs. Greyling, in an affrighted voice from the next room. There was something in the sound that sent them all in. The policeman had started from his nap, and the other one from his newspaper. Mrs. Greyling was standing beside the bed, and held up a candle over it. Dadge's head had fallen back, the eyes were glittering and fixed, the mouth was wide open, and blood was trickling from it.

"It's all over, sir," muttered the woman. "He must have broke a blood vessel."

There was nothing more for the policemen to do. They stared in sheepish awe at the body for some minutes, and then went off to make their report at the station. Mrs. Greyling sank into a chair in a corner of the room, put her handkerchief to her eyes

and burst out crying. But when Mrs. Rose came upstairs to comfort her, she asked to be left alone, as she had something to say to Mr. Ramshart, and presently she joined the curate and Hugh, who had retired to the sitting-room.

"Mr. Ramshart," she stammered, with a tearful face. "Did my brother say anything particular to you before he died?"

"Yes, Mrs. Greyling, he spoke about the murder of Captain Travers."

"Thank God for it, sir!" sobbed the poor woman. "*It was he who killed Captain Travers.* He once told me the truth to ease his mind, and made me promise I'd repeat it after he was dead, if anything could come by the telling of it. But poor Dr. Snow, who was sent to penal servitude for the murder, he's dead too, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is dead," answered Ramshart.

"So my brother wrote to me, not long ago, sir. Lord have mercy on us; it's been the death of many. It killed my poor brother's wife, sir, for she guessed it all; and William himself, he was never the same man from that time, for he took to drink,

and this is the end of it—leaving his four children on my hands.”

“Sit down and compose yourself,” kindly said Ramshart, offering her a chair, as she burst out sobbing afresh ; and after this she began her narrative according to the disconnected ejaculatory manner of uneducated people. This is the substance of what she said :

“It happened in this way, gentlemen. My brother was out on night duty at Kilburn ; he was weak from having been ill after some burglars had nearly killed him, kicking him in the head and stomach, and he had drunk a glass too much, though he wasn't given that way at the time—not at all. He used to say that ‘one particular glass of gin and water,’ which a publican gave him, meaning it in kindness, did all the mischief. It made him unsteady, coming on the top of another glass, so that he was a bit off his nerve, as he says. . . . The night was dark and wet, suddenly a man comes tearing towards William, shouting and brandishing a knife. My brother grappled with him. . . . He'd been so dreadfully knocked about

by those burglars, and not a penny of extra pay for it—no, not even a new coat allowed him for the one which the burglars spoil—that he got scared, as he says. He wrestled with the man, wrenched the knife out of his hand, and struck him on the top of the head with it. . . . Of course he didn't mean to kill the man, but that Captain Travers he was a drunken one too, with scarcely a breath of life in him, so they say. He just dropped dead, and my brother, seeing what he'd done, lost his head, and threw him into a garden."

"But why did your brother not tell the simple truth to his officers?" asked the curate, greatly agitated.

"He didn't dare, sir, at first. Just at that time, there had been an outcry in the newspapers about policemen being too free with their staves, and all the force had received orders not to be violent with bad characters. As William used to say, sir: 'Why do they send out a policeman on night duty alone? They ought always to be two together after dark in the lonely quarters—so many of 'em married men, too, with families to keep.' You see, sir, if my brother had

told the truth, he must have been dismissed and imprisoned, and perhaps he might have got penal servitude. Of course he ought to have spoken out, and many's the time he's confessed it since; but it was too late once he got off his beat without making his report. He hesitated for a moment, and that lost him. Things would have looked blacker and blacker for him if he had spoken after allowing Dr. Snow to be arrested. He kept thinking the doctor would get off for want of proof, but Captain Travers's life was insured, and that made the jury bring in their verdict of guilty. . . . William was like a crazy man all that time, but he'd took to drink, and things went from bad to worse with him. He'd wanted to save his home, and his wife died. It's a wonder to me how he ever remained fit for duty and got promotion; but it seems that he'd come to be so reckless about his own life, that he did a number of bold things. There was a bit in the newspapers once about his flying at the heads of some runaway horses in a nobleman's carriage. 'Twas after that they made him an inspector."

Here Mrs. Greyling's voice broke, and she wailed, "Such a steady man as my poor brother once was, sir, and so good to his wife and children; never a bit hasty, and always bringing his wages home. But murder will out, as they say in books; and don't it seem awful, sir, that this Captain Travers, who drank, should have left his sin like a curse on my brother who killed him, not meaning it, but unknown to all save himself and God Almighty. William used to say it himself. 'Maria,' he'd say to me, 'There's a curse on my head. It's the dead man that's done it, and I shan't get no rest any more.' There, gentlemen, that's the whole story. I couldn't tell it to any one while poor William was alive, could I now? How could I let my own brother be hung?"

* * * * *

"Well; these revelations have come too late to save poor Snow," remarked Hugh, as he and the curate were walking towards Highbury after midnight, very grave both of them.

"Happily our lives do not end on this earth," answered Ramshart; and the story does not come too late to set Mrs. Snow's mind at rest." Then he asked Hugh to repeat the name of the hotel where Mrs. Snow was staying, and he intimated that he would call upon her that same day. "Will you come with me, Armstrong, and bear your witness to what we have heard?"

"Yes, I will, indeed; for I am curious to see the poor thing. Heavens! what a martyrdom she has endured."

"And like a martyr," added Ramshart. "God be praised that in my heart I never doubted her, and what a lesson in faith this all is!"

"And the story clears Chauncey Travers of some things, too," continued Hugh. "I'll tell you what it is, Ramshart. When I entered that house I was half suspecting that Travers had murdered his father. Now that will be a lesson to me. Let the man be what he may, I am not going to be set against him by mere appearances, or I shall be committing some fatal blunder."

So the two men walked on—the one

musings how strange are the hazards that bring truth to light; the other reflecting that there was no hazard at all, but simply the Unseen Hand working miracles, as it was of old, is now, and shall be for ever.

"Though, on reflection, I don't think Mrs. Snow can have been in love with her husband," remarked Hugh. "She may have done her duty and the rest of it, but there must have been a fear in her that he was guilty, and this must have estranged her somewhat, otherwise she would not have transferred her affections to Charlie Harrowell so soon."

"She did not think her husband morally guilty, but certainly she had some doubts, and I am afraid she will suffer acutely from having entertained such misgivings. As to her engagement," here the curate hesitated. "Well, I confess it has astonished me; but I repeat, you must see Mrs. Snow, and I will defy you, after that, to harbour an unkind thought about her. Further, you may be assured that she will do her duty to her husband's memory."

"She shall have all my assistance in that

direction!" exclaimed Hugh, who already thought of the article he could write.

They parted near the curate's lodgings, agreeing to meet in Northumberland Avenue at noon, in order to call on Mabel. It was their duty to inform the widow, without delay, that her husband's innocence had been established. Hugh had in his pocket a document which set forth all the points of Mrs. Greyling's deposition, and which bore her signature. That document would have to be given to Mrs. Snow, and she would use it as she thought fit, if it pleased her publicly to vindicate the memory of her injured husband.

He bent his steps westwards, intending to take a cab in Islington. His way lying through Highbury Place, he had to pass by the Harrowells' house. There were lights behind the dining-room blinds. Why should he not go in and tell Charlie what had happened? Although the time was an hour after midnight, it was not too late to bring a message that must deeply interest and affect Charlie—that is, the tidings that the woman whom he proposed to marry need nevermore

hang her head at the mention of her first husband.

He knocked, not loudly, and rang. The door was opened upon the chain, and a voice from inside asked who was there. As there was no light in the hall, Hugh could not see the speaker, but he recognized Chauncey Travers's voice, and gave his own name.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Armstrong," said Travers, unfastening the chain. "Everybody has gone to bed. Charlie came back from Henley to-day, but he retired more than two hours ago. Come in."

"I have come with some important news," said Hugh, preceding Travers into the late alderman's study, which communicated through folding doors with the dining-room. The place was in some confusion, which Travers explained by saying that he had been taking an inventory and was making up all the family papers into packets. He was dressed in an elegant black velvet smoking-jacket, with red Turkish slippers, and he held a lighted cigar. Whilst Hugh divested himself of his overcoat and settled into an arm-chair, Travers took up a position behind the

writing-table at two full arms' lengths from his visitor.

"The import of my news is even greater to you than to Charlie," proceeded Hugh. "So we need not awake our friend. I am happy to say that the murderer of your father has been discovered. It was not Dr. Snow."

"Who was it then?" cried Travers, springing up. The cigar dropped from his hand, and, after a swift glance at Hugh, his eyes peered beyond him into the next room, as though to look if anybody else had stolen in. The significance of this look was so marked, that Hugh replied to it as if it had been a spoken question.

"There is nobody with me," he said, turning his head over his shoulder. "The man who killed your father was that policeman Dadge, who was a witness at the trial. He died this evening."

Travers sank into a chair, and Hugh compressed Mrs. Greyling's rambling narrative into a pithy recital—that of a man accustomed to think clearly and to write with concision. Even as he talked, it occurred to him that

Chauncey Travers had perhaps been an affectionate son, and that, at all events, it behoved him to speak as if such were the case. He couched his words on the assumption that Travers had endured years of heavy affliction through the fact that the murderer of his father was his own brother-in-law.

Travers played his part well. The nature of the communication that was being made, justified him in sitting silent. He shaded his eyes with his left hand, while his right arm hung by his side, the hand concealed in the pocket of his coat. But through his fingers Travers watched Hugh. He watched to see whether anything lay behind this narrative, whether Hugh would not suddenly start up and level a series of terrible accusations against him. Had Hugh done that, he would have been a dead man, for Travers's concealed hand was closed over the stock of a revolver.

"Will you repeat all this to Charlie in the morning?" said Hugh, as he finished his account. "We should only spoil his night's rest if we were to tell him now, but I dare say you and he will like to make Mrs. Snow

acquainted with all the facts before Ramshart and I call upon her towards midday. We are merely going to Mrs. Snow to bear our oral testimony, and to ask if we can do anything for her. Of course she will like that something should be said in the papers."

"It is very kind of you," answered Travers, with an effort. "Will anything of this appear in the *Express* that is being printed at this moment?"

"No, I did not get the news in time for our next issue; but I hope to-morrow's paper will publish the whole story, and with a rousing leader, too. Mrs. Snow's wrongs must be trumpeted to the world. She has felt scruples about accepting Charlie Harrowell because of her husband's disgrace; but when her story is known, she will stand on a very different footing—a proud footing."

"Of course; and I repeat that I feel grateful to you for all this, Armstrong. But excuse me if I cannot talk much with you now. My mind is disturbed and I must collect myself."

This was so natural, that Hugh did not prolong the interview; and he took civil leave of Travers, but without offering him his

hand, for the man was not cleared of the lie he had told about his encounter with Captain Ramshart, nor of the other lie by which he had denied to the curate that Mrs. Snow was his sister. Hugh assumed that he should see Travers at the hotel later in the day, and he alluded to this as the street door was being opened for him. He little thought what he had done to Chauncey Travers.

The revelation of Albert Snow's innocence was the one thing which Travers had never taken into his reckoning, and to him it boded irremediable exposure. But he had to bless his luck again in this, that the revelation and the exposure had not come simultaneously. He had time before him for flight. He spent the remainder of the night in preparations for absconding. He would not have trusted himself to sleep for a minute in that house lest events should steal a march on him whilst he closed his eyes. The slightest noise that broke the silence of the night, the distant rolling of wheels, footfalls on the street pavement, the striking of church clocks, made him quake. He kept his revolver to hand, transferring it to the pocket of his

trousers when he removed his coat to pack things in his portmanteau.

He had about two thousand pounds in his possession, but he meant to get more before he fled. Hugh had left with him the paper which Mrs. Greyling had signed, so that he was enabled to abridge his own verbal explanations to Charlie. He went up to see Charlie in his bedroom as soon as he heard him ring for his hot water ; and, profiting by the stupefaction and emotion which seized upon the young man, he rapidly concluded his business with him about the part-proprietorship of the *Cheapside Mail*. He said that he wanted money to pay for his plant and machinery that very day, and Charlie, without suspicion, signed him a cheque for twenty thousand pounds. Was not Travers now a friend whom he could trust without stint ? Was he not about to become his brother-in-law ? and had not Hugh Armstrong and Mr. Ramshart already signified their confidence in him by committing to him this paper of Mrs. Greyling's ?

It was an unimaginable triumph to Charlie that Albert Snow's innocence would empower

him to hold his head high in proclaiming his love for Mabel. No longer could his sisters, or the fluttering hesitation of his own conscience, suggest to him that he had been rash in bestowing his love. It would be a glory to him that he had given his heart to a deeply injured woman, and the whole world would applaud his devotion, while owning that the woman whom he would lead to the altar was a mate of whom any man might be proud.

"You won't take it unkindly, old fellow, if I don't go with you to see Mabel this morning," said Travers, passing a hand as if in pain across his brow. "All this has upset me, and Mabel will be more glad to hear the story from you alone."

"Won't you come, though?" asked Charlie, secretly exulting that he was to be the first bearer of the great tidings.

"I have much to do," continued Travers. "I must settle with these machinery people. Then I feel I ought to go to the Home Office to plead for the rehabilitation of poor Albert Snow's memory. I have even some thoughts of going down to Portland and

questioning the governor and chaplain. There would be a melancholy consolation in doing this. In any case, don't be surprised if I should not return this evening. I may be absent twenty-four hours."

Before Charlie came down to breakfast, Travers and his portmanteau were gone. He cashed his cheque as soon as the bank was open, and spent the whole forenoon in converting the notes which he had received into other notes, English and foreign. He drove to the Bank of England, to the offices of money changers, to his club, to his printer's, to his tradesmen, to every place where he could ask change for bank-notes without exciting suspicion. For greater prudence, he went to no two places in the same cab, and he lingered nowhere long. Three-quarters of an hour sufficed him to pack up all the portable property which he had left at Ascot Chambers, and thence he drove away with his boxes in a four-wheeled cab to the cloak-room of a railway station. An hour later he returned in another cab, fetched his luggage away, and deposited it at another station. He carried with him

a black bag, in which he stowed away the notes and gold of his exchanges, but, to avoid confusion, he had to keep the bank-notes paid him by Harrowell's bankers about his person, and his pockets bulged with them.

He made a short appearance at the office of the *Cheapside Mail* in Fleet Street. His clerk, Jiffkins, was at work as usual, copying addresses out of the directory. Travers was at this moment conscious of a sinking which came from fatigue and the want of food. He sent Jiffkins to go and order him a plate of cold meat and a pot of beer from a neighbouring luncheon bar, and gave him a twenty-pound note to pay for these things.

"Money pouring down in cataracts," cried the little clerk, as he tendered the note to a barmaid, who cashed it without parley. "That *Cheapside Mail* is going to be the marvel of the age, I shouldn't wonder if we all married earls' daughters."

"You'll have to commit bigamy then," laughed the barmaid, who knew Jiffkins of old. "Bless me, aren't you spliced tight enough already?"

"No matter," responded Jiffkins, with a rollicking slap on the crown of his dented hat, "the touch of those crisp bits of paper on one's finger-tips always makes me feel I should like to be jumping through paper hoops."

"There, go along with you!" said the barmaid, passing the pewter pot, "and just get your earl's daughter to sew up your coat for you under the arms."

Jiffkins was not too proud to carry the refreshment tray to his master with his own hands. Travers took a long draught at the beer, and ate with avidity. He was refreshed, and now a yearning desire stole upon him to see his sister Mabel for the last time. It has been said that his affection for his sister was the one point in his character by which he had contact with honest humanity. Within a day or two at furthest, his sister would know him to be infamous beyond words, and she could never bear to hear of him again without shrinking. But there still lay a few hours before him in which he could go and be received with trust, in which he could hear a few parting words of sisterly

love, and say something on his side which would leave a kind thought about him in Mabel's mind, in spite of all that was going to happen.

He surmounted the weakness, for he dared not risk the visit. He was treading among pitfalls. A wild fear agitated him, lest abruptly at some street corner a hand should fall upon his collar and stop his flight. He locked the door of his editorial room, after calling to Jiffkins to remove the tray, and, passing through the outer office with his bag, he laid a new twenty-pound note on his clerk's desk.

"That's for you. It will pay your wages for some weeks, and I'm going to give you a few days holiday, Jiffkins. You needn't return till I send for you. This place is going to be closed for alterations and repairs.

"All this for me, sir?" exclaimed the little clerk, holding up the note in grateful amazement.

"Yes, you have been a good servant to me; but now lock up the office, and go off to enjoy yourself."

The order had not to be given twice.

Having exchanged his torn coat for the other, which was in a slightly better condition, Jiffkins was soon standing on the pavement of Fleet Street, debating in his mind whether he might not buy something nice for tea, and indulge in the luxury of a threepenny ride on the box seat of a 'bus all the way to his home in Camden Town.

Chauncey Travers had meanwhile disappeared.





CHAPTER XIV.

CHARLIE had lost no time in dressing and breakfasting after signing his cheque to Travers, and he was just on the point of setting out for Mabel's hotel, when a hansom drove up with Mr. Sheeves. It will be remembered how Mr. Sheeves hasted from Henley in order to rescue Charlie from what he believed to be a senseless entanglement. The express went too slowly for him, and yet he reached London with abundance of time to spare, for he could not lay hands on Charlie that day.

Calling at Highbury Place he saw only Travers, but from him he concealed that he had any business of importance with young Harrowell. It behoved him to be wary with Travers, and he now came there early so as

to make sure of finding Charlie at home, and of being able to speak with him privately.

"Is Mr. Travers in?" were his first words, as he was shown into the dining-room. His nose was all aglow from early rising, and from driving before he had broken his fast, for he had counted on breakfasting with Charlie. But Charlie had got his hat and gloves on, and was impatient to be off.

"Travers has gone away for the day," said Charlie; "and, excuse me, Mr. Sheeves, but I must go to the West End at once, for I have business of the utmost importance."

"First hear what I have to say, my dear Charlie," answered Mr. Sheeves, struck by the young man's excitement. "I was your father's friend and partner, and may speak to you as if you were my own son. I know all about your affair with Mrs. Snow. Now, take a word of caution from me."

"As to what?" asked Charlie. "You have heard that Mrs. Snow was the widow of a convict. Well, her husband was an innocent man. We have just got the proofs of it."

"A cock-and-bull story!" exclaimed Mr. Sheeves.

"Nothing of the sort. See this paper," replied Charlie. And he produced Mrs. Greyling's deposition.

Mr. Sheeves was staggered. Having read the paper—and he perused it with some attention—he could only rejoin, "Well, Harrowell, as your father's lifelong friend, I think I had some right to be consulted about this."

"Was I to consult you about falling in love?" asked Charlie, with a smile, for he meant to be pleasant.

"Never mind—never mind," responded Mr. Sheeves in an injured tone. "I can only trust that you will think twice about what you are going to do. I need not tell you that your sisters are deeply grieved, so is Mrs. Sheeves. It has been a great blow to us all."

"I am very sorry," muttered Charlie, with more politeness than sincerity, and he made a step towards the door.

"Oh, don't let me stop you," ejaculated Mr. Sheeves, sniffing plaintively at an aroma

of bacon that hung about the room, but too much huffed to own that he should like some food. "It is in the nature of young men to rebuff advice, but if any mischief comes of this, I am the man to whom you will probably turn for advice, and I shall be always ready to give it you, mind that."

Upon this they walked out, and as Charlie had no hansom, Mr. Sheeves made a solemn offer to drive him whithersoever he would. It was as though he said, I will set you down at the door of a gaming-house if you are bent on following the road to ruin. But Charlie jumped into the cab and thought to mollify his father's friend by proposing that he should be a witness of his interview with Mabel. This suggestion however, Mr. Sheeves (being the father of three marriageable daughters) rejected almost as an insult.

"Let it be clearly understood, Harrowell, that I wash my hands of all this," he said with dignity; and he spoke not a word more till he had deposited Charlie at the corner of Northumberland Avenue, where he wished him freezingly good-bye, and shook his head at him.

Charlie was hastening to Mabel without having exactly calculated the effect of the news which he was bearing. He had spent the whole of the previous afternoon with her, when not a sign of the impending revelation was at hand, and she had been supremely happy in the tidings which he brought her of his sisters' consent to the marriage. Clear as the sky after a storm that has quite passed off had been the evening of that day. The two lovers had parted with melting looks, their hands lingering in a long pressure, and their hearts full of hope in the coming time.

But now Charlie's tidings caused a great shock. Weeping over the pathetic and lamentable story of the crime for which her guiltless husband had suffered, Mabel betrayed more grief than her lover altogether liked. He became jealous of the sentiment that still bound her to her dead husband. He had come with a bounding heart, looking upon the message he brought as one of consolation that would remove another obstacle from his path, and he expected Mabel to harmonize at once with his ecstatic feelings.

But she could not do that. Far from it. For a few minutes she appeared to shrink from him.

She was searching her heart to discover whether she had been faithful enough in thought to the husband who had loved her so well, and who had been done to death by the follies of her drunken father. Albert Snow's life had been to her and hers one of unwavering devotion, tenderness, and charity, with ruin and death as the reward of it all. As his misfortunes made him rise to saintliness in her sight, so were all men, for the moment, diminished beside him, and Charlie with the rest. She was almost offended at him for having stolen away her heart when it was not hers to give. True, his devotion in being willing to take her had been great and noble, but in her agony she could but dimly perceive that.

"My poor, poor Bertie!" she kept on repeating. "You must forgive me, Charlie; but all this is too dreadful."

"I am very sorry, Mabel. I thought I was bringing you good news," he murmured, with a pale face and biting his lips.

“Good news!” echoed Mabel, sobbing. “If only my poor husband could have lived an hour to hear this! To think of his dying alone in prison and perhaps with the idea that I doubted him. He was the best, most gentle of men. I remember how my mother in her dying breath blessed him.”

“But this is not going to make any difference in your feelings to me, Mabel?” asked Charlie, with concern and some resentment in his tone.

“No, no, dear; but I should like to be alone now. I ought to feel happy at this, but it seems to crush me.”

Charlie reminded her, however, that Ramshart and Armstrong were coming to bear their oral testimony to Dadge's death-bed words and to Mrs. Greyling's confessions. A private sitting-room had been placed at Mabel's disposal for receiving her visitors, and there she and Charlie had to remain for another hour, and alone, until her grief was to some extent assuaged. Charlie looked very glum. He walked about with his hands in his pockets, drummed on the window-panes and glanced at his watch. Womanlike, Mabel

perceived that he was jealous and displeased, and this helped to bring her round. He was to be her support, her husband henceforth, and she could not afford to anger him for the sake of honouring the dead.

So, by the time Ramshart and Armstrong arrived, she had become composed. One look at her calm good face and tearful eyes predisposed Hugh in her favour.

"How can I thank you both?" she said, rising with outstretched hands. "Mr. Ramshart, this salvation, for it is nothing less, is owing chiefly to you."

"And I have an apology to make, Ramshart," exclaimed Charlie. "I hope you will no longer remember how I spoke to you last time we met."

"No, no; things have worked themselves out," answered the curate. "And now we have got to arrange how all this shall be published. Our friend Armstrong will see to that."

"Would Mrs. Snow mind my putting a few questions?" asked Hugh, taking out his note-book.

"For the newspapers?" inquired Mabel.

“Will this now be made known to the whole world?” She spoke in trepidation, for her unspoken thoughts were that her marriage with Charlie must now be delayed for at least a year. Public opinion would never tolerate her remarriage while the story of her husband’s wrongs was still fresh in its circuit from mouth to mouth.

This did not yet occur to Charlie, and he affectionately pressed Mabel to answer Hugh’s questions about her past life, her husband’s demeanour in prison, her last interview with him, and so forth. These interrogations were put in the kindest, that is, in the most business-like way, being intended to furnish Hugh with ample information for his newspaper, and to strengthen the article which he was going to write. Taken down in shorthand, questions and answers followed in rapid succession, and the ordeal did Mabel good. After pleading so long to stoney ears that would not hearken to a word on her husband’s behalf, it was a triumph to the widow—and the feeling of it grew upon her as she spoke—to be able to proclaim her husband’s innocence by sound of trumpet, as Mr. Ramshart had put

it. Even Charlie began to understand the situation, and his better feelings prevailed over his jealousy. Was not Mabel the guardian of her husband's honour? Who but she could tell fully what the poor man had endured and how unjustly?

She might have spoken words enough to fill columns now, and they would all have gone into print. The world is ever offering either too much justice or too little.

"I suppose I can see Mr. Travers?" said Hugh when he at length pocketed his pencil. "His evidence would be valuable, too."

"Travers has gone to Portland," replied Charlie, adding in a whisper, "I think he wants to find out something about Dr. Snow's last days, and inquire if the body cannot be removed for decent re-burial."

"Oh, I see," muttered Hugh, booking this as a fresh item of information for the *Express*. "Well, I think we have materials here for some telling columns," and, saying this, he complacently turned over the leaves of his well-scribbled book.

He and Ramshart then wished Mabel a cordial good-bye, but Charlie stayed with her

a little longer. He had nothing to do, and nowhere to go. He hoped Mabel would request him to remain with her, but she did not; and, though he wondered how she could bear to be alone on a day like this, he felt it would be unkind to intrude upon her. He left, saying that he would call again in the evening to see if anything new had happened. They kissed; she submissive to his caress, he, shy, with an indefinable idea that his intimacy with his future wife was no longer what it had been. He went and wandered disconsolately about the streets, looking into shop windows, and trying to shake off the sense of there being a load at his heart. He ought to have been exultant, but he was timid. Eventually his cogitations shaped themselves into this fixed question as to whether Mabel had loved her husband much, and the more he dwelt on the matter the less peace he had.

In the meantime Hugh Armstrong went with journalistic energy to prepare for his night's work. His only fear was lest some evening newspaper should get hold of his news before the *Express*, for he naturally wished his own paper to be the first in the

field. Great was his relief then when the contents bills, flaunted by the ragged little boys along the Strand, contained nothing to show that Dr. Snow's case had got bruited.

Our friend walked to the office of the *Express* in Fleet street to confer with one of the sub-editors. The editor, who had chambers in the Albany, never put in an appearance till five o'clock, and was not to be disturbed before that hour even for a new Gunpowder Plot. At five p.m. he came to open letters and remained till seven, when he vanished to dress and dine, reappearing at ten p.m., from which hour, until four a.m. his heart, soul, and brain were all thrown into his journal. When a man devotes this much of his time to work, he may claim the remainder for himself, and the editor of the *Express* had made it a law that the Albany was to be his place of refuge, closed to all manner of people whose business was with ink and paper.

Hugh's business, however, could be transacted with a sub-editor, and one of these pale-faced ministers of the Press was always on duty. Space must be cleared for Dr. Snow's case, Hugh said, as the event of the

day. The speeches of divers political indefatigables spouting out of Session, like so many dolphins unable to live entirely under water, would have to be basketed. Reporters of the muddy-trousered, ever nimble, trusty kind, who could be relied upon to keep their news for the *Express* alone, must be sent to Kilburn, where Dr. Snow had lived, and to Finsbury Park, where Dudge had died, to collect all the personal details procurable. The report of Dr. Snow's trial must be reprinted. Hugh's own interview with Mrs. Snow must go in, and then it was expedient that somebody should be set to work to write an article on celebrated miscarriages of Justice. There is always somebody ready for such work, with the British Museum at hand, and the stories of Lesurques and the Baker of Venice to start with.

Having settled all this, and refreshed himself at the Cock with a chop and a pint of bitter, Hugh went to consult a famous criminal barrister as to the legal aspects of Dr. Snow's condemnation. Those who read newspaper articles have little idea as to the trouble which they sometimes cost to con-

scientious writers. Hugh Armstrong had to determine upon his "line"—that is, to convince himself as to whether the administrators of justice had been in any way to blame or whether Dr. Snow had simply been the victim of one of those judicial errors which no human prudence can avert.

He and his wigged friend, who chanced to have been in court when Dr. Snow was tried, ruled for a case of error. The editor was of the same mind, and when Hugh sat down to write in his little room at the office towards eleven o'clock, after a pretty long conference with his chief, he was pleased enough at having to "slate" nobody except the unfortunate Dadge. But he wrote with a strong feeling of sympathy for Mabel. Her straightforward answers to his questions, her strikingly sweet face and innocent looks, had all persuaded him that, whatever Travers might be, Travers's sister was a woman without fault, and as this attractive, sorrowful little thing was to be his sister-in-law, it was natural that the journalist should throw into his description of her personally, and into the recital of her wrongs, all the eloquence that was re-

quired to make her stand as an exceedingly interesting personage in the sight of men.

While Hugh was correcting his last proof in the small hours of the night his editor walked in and said——

“It’s all right. None of the news agencies have got it. The *Express* will be first with the news, and it will make a boom.”





CHAPTER XV.

WHILE the steam presses of the *Express* groaned and rattled as they threw off the tens of thousands of damp sheets that were to scatter the news of Albert Snow's innocence broadcast, an epidemic of low fever was raging among the convicts at Portland, and the supposed murderer of Captain Travers was one of the prisoners who were assisting the medical staff of the infirmary.

In a box-like room with grated windows, and shelves covered with white pots, Dr. Snow worked all day pounding pill-paste in a mortar, or mixing cooling draughts. He had for his companion an infamous scoundrel whose society he loathed, and who left him to do the pestle-work as being the hardest. The two were always together, except at bed-time. Sometimes a doctor dropped in,

sometimes a warder. The sunlight scarcely penetrated into the room, and the only relief from the pounding and mixing consisted in going the round of the fever wards with the medicines.

Snow had been selected for the infirmary work not on account of any interest that was taken in him personally by the authorities, nor indeed because convicts possessing his medical attainments were rare in the prison. There are but too many doctors, lawyers, and, alas! clergymen, in our convict establishments, and it is only by chance that one of these comes to be employed on tasks for which he is particularly competent. As a rule the prison doctor prefers not to be assisted in his surgery by a felon who belongs to the faculty, just as the chaplain would rather not take a degraded brother-clergyman to work under him in the school-room and library. Snow happened to be in the infirmary himself when the epidemic began, and, as the chest-complaint from which he was ailing did not confine him to bed, he was pressed into service to make up prescriptions.

Of sympathy for his misfortunes there was none. These prison officials are not more hard-hearted than other men, but they cannot take upon them to retry cases which juries have settled. "Who is this B 255?" "A Dr. Snow who murdered his wife's father after insuring his life." "A pretty gentleman then." So would the dialogue run, and there was an end of the matter.

Albert Snow had never been a model prisoner. He was obedient, and he broke no rules; but there had been no diligence in him over his tasks of quarrying and barrow-trundling. He ought to have got into the first-class, which would have entitled him to wear a blue suit and to have tea for his supper instead of gruel; but he had been too weak and too apathetic to earn full marks. There was also a chronic dejection in him which the authorities took for sullenness. When the chaplain spoke to him of Divine forgiveness, the words glanced off his heart as drops over a polished surface of stone, they could not penetrate. When bluff warders called to him to rouse himself and cheer up a bit, he could only shrug his

shoulders. What was he to rouse himself for? The prospect to cheer him was one of lifelong drudgery and sorrow, with not a possible mitigation except that blue suit instead of the drab, and the tea in place of the gruel.

So had he lived for four years, until Tobias Ramshart had come to Portland and had thrown a faint ray of hope across his path. But it had needed all the London curate's inexperience and innocence of heart to make him attach himself as he had done to the convict whom no one else befriended. The authorities hardly liked him for suggesting that B 255 might be guiltless. The chaplain of Portland, when he returned from his seaside holiday, did not like it; and he remarked with benevolent asperity that to raise false hopes was to add undue torments to the severity of just punishment.

Then had come to him the intelligence of his wife's death—a sudden stunning blow without warning. One morning the chaplain had entered his cell calmly with the tidings: "I grieve to say that I have bad news for you, my poor fellow! The governor

has received a letter announcing the death of your wife, after a short illness."

When a cup is full the ocean may pass over it without adding a drop. Mabel's death clove the convict's last tie to life, yet he did not sink under the shock. The chaplain was surprised at his stoicism, and offered to do him a kindness by writing to ask for more details about his wife's death, and about the place of her burial. But Snow refused.

"No, thank you, sir," he answered, picking absently at the sleeve of his jacket. This was two days after the news had been brought him.

"I thought it might be a consolation to you to learn more. I know she was a good wife to you. It is very sad ; but, poor thing, she is at rest now."

This was the convict's true consolation—that his young wife was at rest. Fate, which had never been tired of smiting him and her, had done its worst now, and whether it was better for her to have lived in abandonment, shame, and struggling, or to die and be at peace, was a question which the wretched

husband could only answer by the reflection that henceforth she would be tormented no more.

It was not for herself but for him she had lived throughout those years when she had come to see him behind the iron bars ; nevertheless, every one of those visits had been to him—for her sake—an ineffable torture. Albert Snow had loved his wife with all the tenderness of his nature ; he could not have loved her so much had he found no solace in the thinking that she was now released from bearing half the heavy load of his chains. Moreover, his anxieties about her were now at an end. She was asleep—no matter where, since he could never gaze upon her grave. Her spirit would dwell with him, and in truth his darling was nearer to him in death than she had been when alive.

For Albert Snow knew himself to be dying by inches. In a climate like that of England there was no chance of his cure. He went about among the patients of the infirmary, hacked now and then by terrible fits of coughing, and he marked the progress of the disease in him with no wish that he

should ever get better, but only with a hope that his end should come soon.

He wondered that the miserable creatures to whom he carried drugs should cling to existence as they did—at least some of them. They drank greedily of their potions, as if these were elixirs that were to bring them freedom and happiness instead of merely strength to support more slavery. Some indeed offered a passive resistance to the medicine; they would have closed their teeth against it, had they dared, and to Snow it seemed a hideous mocking of charity that the doctor should strive to coax these refractory ones into a wish to live in order that their wretchedness might be prolonged. Many a time he bethought him that the most merciful prescription which the doctor could have ordered would have been a deadly narcotic all round.

Sleep was the only thing which Snow himself looked to find in death. He cherished no idea of a resurrection in which he should meet Mabel again—for religion had been dried up in his heart. He was no saint that his spirit could soar to a contemplation of

Divine justice from the infamous abyss in which his body grovelled. He had been an honest man. He had gone through the world denying himself, and doing kind things, and his portion was to be numbered unjustly among felons. If the chaplain had hinted to him that he was imperilling his soul by repining against his lot, he would have been tempted to exclaim, as an unhappy Frenchman once did in a similar plight, "*Eh bien, on me brûlera, et ce sera une injustice de plus !*"

The convict who worked with Snow in the infirmary was a ruffian whose style was C 231 ; but, being called Thirty-one for shortness, he had played upon his own numeral, and nicknamed himself "The Thirsty One." A little joke goes a long way in prison. You would have imagined, from the jesting and winking that went on over this sobriquet, that all the warders were in good-humoured league to slake the "Thirsty One's" cravings for liquid refreshments. As a matter of fact, the Thirsty One did come in for occasional dregs of tea left by the other convicts, and it made

all the infirmary staff—including some of the patients—merry to accuse him of taking nips from the tonics and cough mixtures.

The Thirsty One grinned, and helped himself to better things than that under cover of the universal good-will that enveloped him. From such little brandy, port wine, and porter as was doled out in extreme cases, he levied a liberal percentage for his own cheek, and he never served a mutton chop or a custard without having his "bite," unless these delicacies were intended for convicts who could do battle for themselves. A strange doctor, not knowing the ways of the place, would have marvelled that his most prostrate patients always managed to get through their food, but this was because the Thirsty One assisted them. Often some dying convict would turn round on his pillow murmuring, "Never mind about my grub, chummie; eat it yourself, and I'll say I ate it."

The Thirsty One was also a doctor—one of those who have filched some American diploma, and practice in the dark byways of the profession. He had committed a hundred medical crimes with impunity

before he tripped up by attempting to poison an old woman whom he had married for her money. Luckily for him the poison failed, and he got off with a sentence of twenty years' penal servitude for "administering with intent." He had served fourteen years of this term, and was expecting to be liberated shortly on a ticket-of-leave. With his close-cropped hair, hook nose, and small eyes close together, he looked like a bird of prey. He affected all the mincing airs of a fashionable doctor in stage farces, rubbed his hands softly together, pursed up his lips, cocked his head, and by such antics made the warders guffaw. He was a detestable villain, creeping up the sleeves of the authorities, hypocritical with the chaplain, an obsequious flatterer of the doctor, and a lying spy upon the other prisoners. There was not a clean spot upon the miscreant's character, and all the authorities had a good word to say for him.

The Thirsty One hated "Fifty-five" (as Snow was called), but his detestation was mollified by the circumstance that his companion never contended with him for the

perquisites of the surgery. Had it not been for this, he would have surreptitiously dropped some stolen article into Snow's pocket so as to get the latter accused of theft, and dismissed from the doctor's service under a heavy punishment with loss of marks. The Thirsty One had more than once rid himself of uncongenial task-fellows in this way, and he bore on his face a mark which had been left there by a calumniated convict, who was flogged for this assault. Being unable to draw Fifty-five into conversation about his antecedents, the Thirsty One revenged himself by soliloquizing aloud and in dulcet tones on all that might give pain to his associate or cause disgust in him. His talk was not the coarse blasphemy of the illiterate convict which can be borne with, though it irritates, but the cold cruel tongue-slime of the scoundrel, who, foul himself, loves to befoul everything, and who rejoices at the sight of anguish.

"Here goes for the stomach-pump," exclaimed the Thirsty One cheerfully one afternoon. "It's wanted for that fat old banker who has been trying to hop the twig

before his time. Yesterday it took three of us to force a draught down his throat, but he cannot expect such tender handling every day; so, before he curls himself up to dream of dividends, he is to have a taste of this."

"Poor wretch!" answered Snow.

"I do not see why it should be 'poor wretch,'" chirruped the Thirsty One. "We are serving our time, why should not the disreputable old blackguard do his? I wouldn't shorten his time by an hour. Aha! It always makes me laugh to see those respectable old prigs, who have lived on hothouse pineapples, obliged to stick their teeth into the Portland potatoes. If it depended on me, they should get all the potatoes with blacks in them and the gristly bits of meat for a change."

Snow, who was mixing a lotion, made no reply.

"By-the-by, that banker was mixed up in some way with insurances," continued the Thirsty One, lightly. "That was your little game, wasn't it? If you were likely ever to get out of here I would put you up to

some dodges about insurances. They're sticky things and require caution."

Then, seeing that Fifty-five paid no heed to him, the dastard tried a different squirt of venom.

"You have just lost your wife, have you not? See how death defies all calculations. Now, when I married my dear old lady, I could have ordered my mourning suit in the full certainly that I should have to wear it before the year was over. That was nearly sixteen years ago, and the dear old thing is kicking up her heels now. . . . Egad! if I were of a jealous turn, I might feel uneasy as to how the old girl had been conducting herself during my absence, for I am sorry to say she has never once come to see me, quite forgetting her marriage vows to love, honour, and obey me. Aha! those marriage vows, flimsy as the bridal veil, fleeting as the orange-flower blossom. It strikes me that Portland is just the place where a little loving and cherishing would come in most useful to us poor fellows."

At this juncture a warder stepped in. "I say, Thirty-one, are you ready with that

stomach-pump? Just run up with it to number Three, and you, Fifty-five, come along o' me. The governor wants to see you."

Snow had at first noticed nothing unusual in the man's tone, but as soon as the Thirsty One had scampered out of the room, the convict observed that the warder's eyes were bent upon him with curiosity.

"You can't think what the governor wants you for?" asked the man, speaking close to his ear.

"No," replied Snow. Visits to the governor are associated in the minds of convicts with punishment, but Fifty-five could not recollect that he had done anything amiss.

"You won't peach if I tell you," continued the warder under his breath. "The newspapers has been a-talking about you."

"Ah! . . ." and it was as though the convict's heart had been plunged into icy water.

"Look at this!" and the warder, drawing a newspaper out of his hind pocket, pointed with a broad thumbnail to a paragraph headed—*Miscarriage of Justice*.

“There, don’t you get fainting now, or you’ll bring me into trouble,” he went on, whisking the sheet away. “You shall see it again by-and-by. I’ll show it you in your cell.”

“One moment, just allow me another glance,” cried Snow, recovering possession of the newspaper, and he collected all his strength to hold it steady in his trembling hands—such strength as he had never put into anything for years. His eyes swam, however, and the deep heaving of his chest brought on a fit of coughing which obliged him to rest his arm and head against the wall.

“There, that’ll do! Come along, now!” said the warder, who had restored the newspaper to his pocket. “Do you feel better?” and seeing that the convict looked weak and giddy, he held him up under the arm, as they made their way to the governor’s room.

The office in which the governor received prisoners was a sort of hall partitioned by iron railings that ascended from the floor to the ceiling. Behind these a chalk line

and the impress of two shoe-soles in stone indicated the place where the convict was to stand, with a warder beside him, while the governor spoke to him from a desk on the other side of the rails. Snow was ordered to stand on the usual spot, and the warder cried, "Attention!" when the governor appeared. But the governor beckoned that the two should come into another room, and so Fifty-five was escorted to a private study, with a bright coal fire, a shining mahogany writing-table, and a carpet of cocoanut matting.

"You can leave us," said the governor to the warder, and by this token alone, had he been of a mind to consider it, Albert Snow could have guessed what a portentous hour had dawned for him.

"I have received two telegrams about you from the Secretary of State," began the governor, who was a carefully dressed military man, with well-brushed grey hair and a tall shirt collar. He had seated himself at his table, with the fire behind him, and he held the telegrams almost at arm's length, whilst he peered at them through a pair of gold-

rimmed glasses. Snow stood facing him, his knees shaking, his mouth dry, his face overspread with a mortal pallor.

He did not distinctly catch the first words that were addressed to him, and the governor had to repeat them.

"The Home Office has ordered me to go up to London with you this evening. You are to be taken to Millbank. A false report of your death was circulated, and this first telegram asked me whether you were alive. But now, tell me, Was the lady who came here to visit you a few weeks ago your lawful wife?"

"Yes, sir."

"The sister of a Mr. Travers?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there is no other person existing who has the right to call herself your wife? Please answer me truly. You risk no punishment by what you may say; my questions are only directed towards clearing up a mystery."

"I assure you, sir," replied Snow, in a trembling voice, "my poor wife, who came to see me here and who has since died, was my only wife."

“Well, then, just compose yourself for what I am going to say. I received a letter some time ago from Mr. Travers, who announced your wife’s death, and this news was communicated to you. Now, there is an article in this newspaper, the *Express*, which is evidently written with familiarity as to your affairs, and which speaks of your wife as being alive.”

Involuntarily Snow advanced towards the table, and propping himself on it with one hand, held out the other for the newspaper.

This was quite contrary to rules, but who could have resisted the convict’s haggard glance of supplication? Besides, this was no time to be standing on rules. As there is no human being more abject than the condemned criminal, so there is none more august than him whom the law has struck undeservedly. Not only in this governor’s office, but in every town of the United Kingdom, yes, and in every city of the world to which London news is flashed by wire, it was known at that moment that a man named Albert Snow had been done to death in prison for a crime which he had never committed.

The governor without hesitation passed the newspaper.

“Draw nearer to the light,” he said compassionately, “and sit down.”

Albert Snow could not have stood in his tremor, and the governor remained silent while the convict's burning eyes pored over the lines which had been read and discussed by thousands upon thousands of his fellow-countrymen that day—that is, the account of Inspector Dadge's death; the deposition of Mrs. Greyling; an eager, feeling letter in which the Rev. Tobias Ramshart spoke to his own knowledge of Albert Snow; and, lastly, the chivalrous leading article in which Hugh Armstrong called upon the Government to make reparation to the young widow of the innocent man who had been judicially murdered.

“It is unaccountable how your death should have come to be reported,” observed the governor, after a long interval, when he perceived that the convict did not mean to speak, but simply buried his face in his hands. “You see, there is evidence of another man having committed the crime for

which you were condemned, and I trust with all my heart that the Home Office will consider this evidence satisfactory. I will not send you back to your cell now, for it will soon be time for us to be starting, and I will arrange that you shall travel with the least discomfort possible."

In that way Albert Snow's penal servitude terminated. The convict dress could not be taken off him yet; but an ulster coat and a felt hat were lent him for the journey, and no chain was put upon him. That night he slept in a cell at Millbank—for he did fall asleep towards daybreak, when his brain, dizzy from thinking, could think no more—and, as he slumbered, the Unseen Hand, in whose protection he had doubted, was removing the last of his shackles.

END OF VOL. II.





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 052905459